# THE MAGAZINE OF Fantasy AND Science Fiction

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AUGUST 40¢

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POUL ANDERSON
MARCEL AYMÉ
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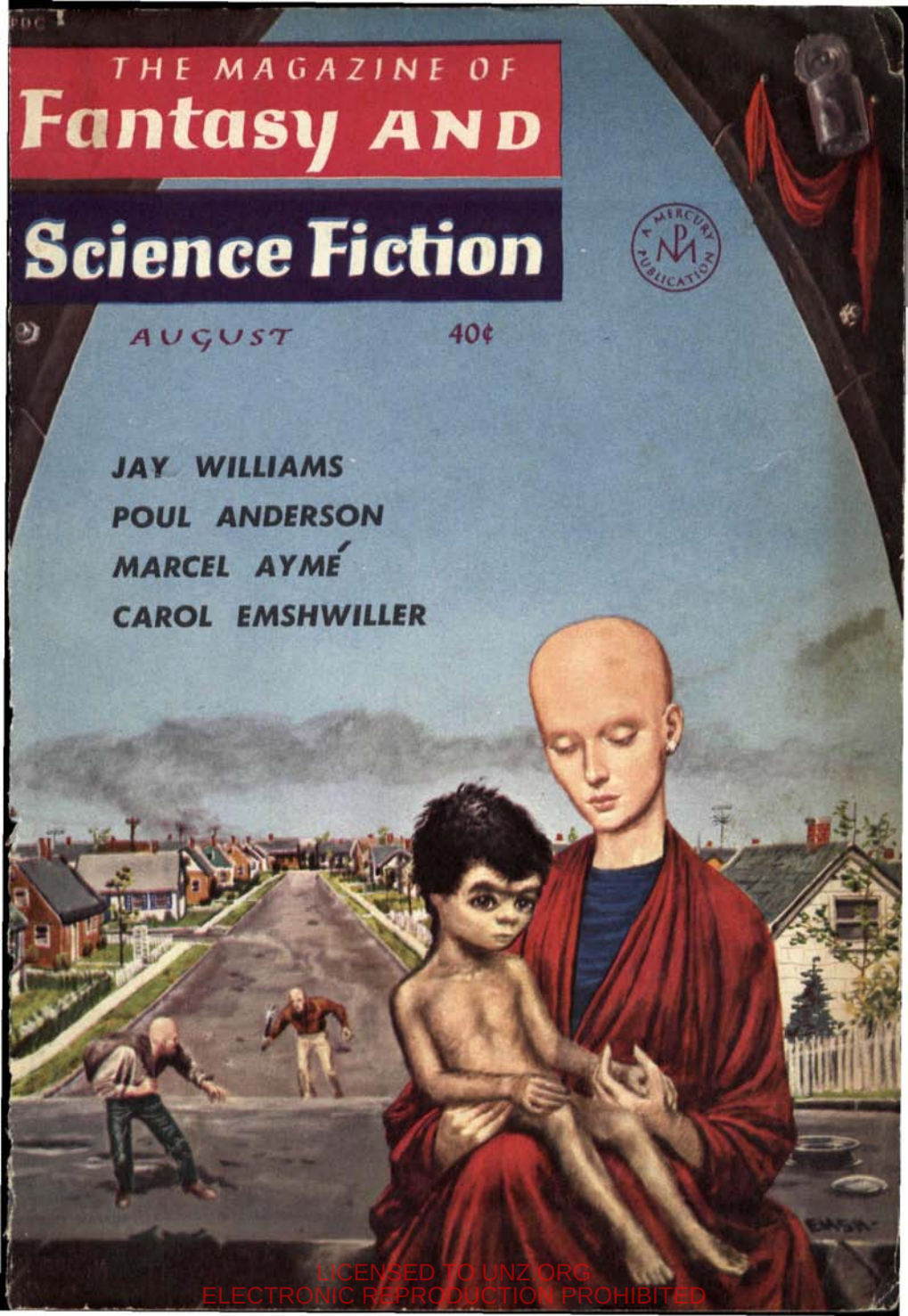

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THE MAGAZINE OF

# Fantasy and Science Fiction

AUGUST

*Including Venture Science Fiction*

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*Cover by Emsh, illustrating "Day at the Beach"*

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## *In this issue . . .*

A letter came in the other day which said, in effect: "Let's not have any more pact-with-the-Devil stories—they have been done to death." We have heard it said that there have been more than enough after-the-atom-bomb-has-fallen stories; and one correspondent went so far as to suggest that we declare a moratorium on time-travel stories. We would like to go on record as being in disagreement with all three of these points of view. We will certainly agree that there have been too many inferior, derivative, unimaginative stories in all three categories (few, if any, we trust, in F&SF), but so has there been an excess of inferior stories about greed, battle, and old age. The point is that all three of the types objected to provide broad canvases for the relatively unrestricted portrayal of aspects of the human spirit. Since literature began, there have been stories about the aftermath of individual, tribal, and national disasters; the good ones offer insight into the weakness and the strength and the magnificent adaptability and durability of mankind. As does "Day at the Beach," by Carol Emshwiller, on page 35 of this issue, which makes its point, we think, more sharply than it would have without the special nature of the preceding catastrophe. For other examples of the advantages of special backgrounds, see "Pact," by Winston P. Sanders, a Devil story, and "Brave To Be a King," by Poul Anderson, and "Obituary," by Isaac Asimov, which are time-travel stories. And let us know what you think . . . ?

## *Coming next month . . .*

Two feature novelets: "The Red Hills of Summer," by Edgar Pangborn—a perceptive, startlingly realistic account of the early steps in the colonizing of a newly discovered planet; and "The Makers of Destiny," by Edward S. Aarons—a tense, fast-moving story of a new kind of war on Earth. Plus a rich assortment of other delicacies.

By the way . . . do not miss F&SF's bonanza October 10th Anniversary All Star issue, featuring 32 extra pages, Part One of a new two-part serial by Robert A. Heinlein, "Starship Soldier," and new stories by Zenna Henderson, Howard Fast, and many others. To be sure you don't miss it, fill in the coupon on page 24.

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*Jay Williams spends more time writing historical novels than he does writing his particularly satisfying brand of science fiction . . . which makes this new tale—concerning an unexpected and astonishing development in the course of the conquest of Venus—especially welcome.*

# OPERATION LADYBIRD

## *by Jay Williams*

MAJOR HERBERT COOPER, CHIEF of Military Intelligence, United Nations Expeditionary Forces (Extra-Terrestrial), lay back in his chair with his feet on the table, thinking. His breathing was slow and regular, his eyes were closed, his hands were folded over his stomach, and a gentle and affectionate smile played about his lips. He was thinking about food.

He was in the Restaurant Chambord, eating a *galantine* of chicken. This vanished mysteriously, to be replaced by a magnificent *filet de boeuf bordelais*. The waiter said, "Mr. Cooper, I think there is one bottle of the Lafite '49 left. The management would like to present it to you."

"Don't be absurd," he replied. "There is no more of the '49."

"I know, sir," said the waiter. "But you're dreaming."

He felt himself shaken violently, and opened one eye. The lean, bronzed, clean-cut face of Lieutenant-Colonel Stoddard, the General's aide, hung above him. "You're dreaming," Stoddard said, accusingly. "Wake up."

"Hi, Speedy," said Major Cooper. "So I was right. There is no more of the '49."

"What?"

"Never mind. Life is difficult enough, without these set-backs. What's up? More Slugs?"

"The General wants you," Stoddard said. "And don't call me Speedy."

Cooper pulled himself slowly upright. If, in its never-ending search for crispness and simplicity, the Army had wanted a single word to describe this chief of Military Intelligence, the word would have been easy to find: he was a slob. There were stains on the front of his uniform blouse, from which a button was also missing; his brown hair hung untidily over his rather puffy face; his zipped boots were scuffed; and he need-



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ed a shave. But his little blue eyes were keen and merry, he had an inexhaustible fund of dirty jokes, and in spite of his casual air his friends had seen the row of medals for distinguished conduct which decorated the front of his seldom-worn parade blouse.

He regarded Stoddard with a kindly air. "But you *are* speedy," he said. "Relax. This is war. The comradeship of the battlefront. And we're not even on Earth. None of your friends at the Army and Navy Club will ever know I called you Speedy."

Stoddard gritted his teeth. "You'd better get yourself cleaned up," he said. "And the war is practically over. Remember?"

Cooper yawned hugely. "Goodness, what a stupid man," he said as Stoddard slammed the door. Then he heaved his six-foot-one more or less erect, casually yanked a wrinkle out of the front of his blouse, and went to the General's office. Beaming down at General Sir George Fulke-Edwards, he sketched out a kind of salute, and said, "Here I am."

There was a long pause. Then he added, "Sir."

The General grunted, brushing his small white moustache up at the corners with one finger. "Major," he said, at last, "you are without doubt the most repulsive officer in my command. In thirty years of military service, I have never encountered anything quite like you. When the Chiefs of Staff saw fit to send me to Venus, I was thoroughly indoctrinated, and I expected to find the Slugs quite as loathesome as they in fact proved to be. But no one indoctrinated me against you. Sit down. Have a fag?"

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir." Cooper dropped into the other chair and helped himself to a cigarette. "What's on the General's mind? Found some more Slugs?"

"No. I rather fancy we've cleaned them out of Alpha. There may be a pocket or two here and there—but I daresay you know all that better than I."

Cooper looked modestly at his fingernails, which were dirty.

"This is quite a different matter," the General went on. "It concerns the arrival—"

"—of John Shinumu. Yes, sir. I've already taken all the necessary precautions."

"Damn it! Will you let me finish? I'm perfectly aware that your filthy department is omniscient. But there's one thing you don't know." The General sat back, and regarded Cooper with satisfaction. "I am assigning you to be personally responsible for the welfare of our distinguished visitor. Personally. Shall I spell that?"

"No, sir. I had already decided that that would be the wisest course, so I've turned over my duties to my staff. I planned to detach one member to work with

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me. I don't think there's much danger for Mr. Shinumu, but I suppose it's as well—"

"Hell!" roared the General "*You* think. *You* suppose. I've got half a mind to court-martial you for—for—for insolence, damn it!"

"Mm, yes. But I am a reasonably efficient MI officer. And where would the General find another chess partner?"

Fulke-Edwards' face was purple. "If anything happens to Mr. Shinumu, I'll do without a chess partner," he sputtered. "Without question, you know exactly when his ship will arrive. I shall expect you to be there on the dot. On the dot! Dismiss!"

Cooper smiled, gave another of his limp salutes, and went to the door. The General said, "Herbert."

"Yes, sir?"

"You won't fail me? I know there isn't much danger, but if he should wander off . . . or anything—"

"Nothing will happen to him."

The General sighed, and nodded. "Off with you, then."

Cooper returned to his own headquarters, and summoned his staff: two captains, three lieutenants, and a master sergeant.

"Al," he said, to Captain Labouchère, "the Old Man's got a firecracker in his pants. You're in command of the outfit. I'm being detached to look after Shinumu." He turned to Sergeant Shirali. "Any word from Base about when he's due to arrive?"

"None."

"God! They're fantastic! Skip down and get hold of the General's bat-man, then. Tell him I'll up the ante to six cartons of cigarettes if he can find out the exact time of arrival."

"You are a thoroughly unprincipled man," said Sergeant Shirali, shaking his head in disapproval.

"Daryushka," said Cooper, looking at the other captain.

Captain Rogoff raised her eyebrows. "I know the Major has something rotten in his mind whenever he sings sweetly at me like that," she remarked.

"You're cute. You'll work with me, guarding Shinumu. This will throw us together more. Perhaps you will learn to reciprocate my affection."

"Yes, Major. I don't think so, Major."

Lieutenant Kanasaki said, "Yes and no. How typical of the Russians."

"Not Russians, Fatso," Cooper said. "I've told you types to lay off that kind of humor. We are a United Nations force."

"But she is still a Russian," the Lieutenant replied, without the slightest sign of remorse. "And when I try to date her, she also gives me yes and no."

"Okay. Dismiss. Bustle about your duties, chop-chop."

"And speaking of chops," he

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mumbled, as they left, "I wonder if there's anything interesting in the files."

He strode purposefully to the filing cabinet, and pulled open the lowest drawer, which was marked *Emergency Top Secret*. After a little reflection, he took out a chicken leg, some liverwurst, a couple of slices of cheese and a hard-boiled egg, and then pushed the camouflaged refrigerator unit shut.

Munching his modest snack, with his feet on the desk, he thought about Darya and what he had just said. That was the astonishing thing about it—they *were* a United Nations force. Every single nation on Earth was represented in some way in the gigantic effort which in two years had set a great army on the planet Venus and had wiped out the Slugs from a continent almost the size of Australia. At first, there had been continual bickering, suspicion, even outright friction. But the war had put an end to that; whatever happened on Earth, here they had shown that in spite of vast cultural and personality differences they could work together, more or less in harmony. You could put that down to John Shinumu.

Cooper pulled open a drawer of the desk, and got out a photograph. It showed a chunky, brown-faced man with a rather blank, stolid expression. Not very heroic or brilliant looking. But he had changed history more profoundly than any other single human being.

John Shinumu, a Hopi Indian of Moencopi Village, was one of those rare phenomena, a true mathematical genius. The tribal council had brought him to the attention of an organization devoted to Indian welfare, which in turn had sponsored his attendance at Harvard University. His progress had been rapid; he had taken his doctorate at MIT at the age of twenty-three, and eventually, working on a joint grant from two foundations, had developed the propulsion principles which now bore his name, and which meant the absolute achievement of space travel.

Then, astonishingly, he had taken his findings and his patents to the Secretary-General of the United Nations. In a calm, brief, simple statement, he had said that he owed allegiance to no nation. He was a member of a conquered people, and whatever his brothers might say, he himself felt that citizenship was not something that could be forced on an unwilling victim of cultural absorption. The Hopi, the People of Peace, he said, had been pauperized, deprived of their lands, treated as savages, and given no independence of action save what they had won bitterly. Therefore, he felt free to give his discovery to the

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world, rather than to one country. He wanted no profit for himself. He would make his findings public only before a joint committee of scientists from all the nations of the world, and guarantees must be given that space travel would be the property not of one country but of all.

The uproar that followed had lasted for months, but in the end, Shinumu had won. Hostilities had not ended, but the old barriers had been slowly leveled, the petty disagreements had been subordinated to the vaster problems of exploration. And then, after the successful landings on the Moon and Mars, had come the landing on Venus and the first encounter with the Slugs.

Almost half of that first ship's complement had been killed in the attack. The rest, trembling with horror and disgust, had fought their way back to the ship. The automatic tapes had recorded the whole scene. The universal hatred and revulsion which the sight of the Slugs aroused had left no room for compromise: clearly, there was no longer room in the galaxy for both human beings and Slugs.

No one nation could have fought the war that followed. But all the resources of earth were behind it, and after nine months of battle, the first continent, Alpha, was cleared of the monsters. It was fitting that on the soil of Venus, so hardly won, John Shinumu should receive the thanks of the whole world—the newly-created Global Order of Service.

Cooper sighed. He thrust the photograph back in the drawer. Then, wiping his hands on the front of his blouse, he thoughtfully began to clean his nails, in preparation for the gala moment.

When the space-ship landed, there were actually more eyes on Major Cooper than on the glittering escort and the small, blue-clad figure of Mr. Shinumu. Even Darya Rogoff, usually self-contained and calm, opened her brown eyes wide in astonishment and shook her curly head. Cooper was combed, shaved, and scrubbed. His decorations glittered on the breast of his freshly-pressed uniform. He even exhaled a faint scent of cologne.

Apparently unconscious of the effect he was creating, he said to Darya, "Let's go. When the Old Man welcomes him, take up a position on his left. The two guys in plain uniforms behind Shinumu are UNSO men; they'll drop back when I signal them."

"Are you really Major Cooper?" she whispered.

"Of course I—oh, I see what you mean. This is for you, Peaches. I wanted to prove to you that I can be savory."

"You have proved it," she said. "It is certainly a change."

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They moved forward with the General. Cooper made a tiny, quick gesture and at once the United Nations Security men stepped back and allowed Cooper and Darya to take their places. It was done smoothly and quietly. The newsmen with their tapes scurried about; the loud-speakers blared a march; simultaneous commands in two dozen languages were snapped and the squares of uniforms shifted in one gigantic movement to the salute. The blue and white flag of the Forces streamed out against the milky sky, and General Fulke-Edwards solemnly shook hands with the mild little Hopi.

The initial ceremonies were quickly over. Cooper and Darya took the visitor to the quarters assigned to him—a bubble from which four officers had been evacuated—and saw to it that his scanty luggage was stowed neatly away.

"I hope you won't mind, sir," Cooper said, "but Captain Rogoff and I will have to stick pretty close to you. The General doesn't want to take any chance of harm coming to you."

"I don't mind." Shinumu's heavy-lidded black eyes twinkled pleasantly. "I have been protected and guarded in one way or another for years. I dislike it, but I understand. You two, at least, seem more human than some of the shadows I've had."

"We'll do our best, sir."

"Please don't call me 'sir.' It seemes excessively military."

Cooper grinned. "Fine," he said. "I've been on my best behavior. Would you mind if I opened my collar? I think I've impressed the Captain, here, quite enough."

Shinumu chuckled. He went to the window and rested his hands on the sill. *"Alathu,"* he said.

"I beg your pardon?" said Cooper.

"In my language, Venus, the Morning Star. It is an amazing sight, isn't it?"

Cooper stood behind him, and stared out. Nine months here had given this much of it familiarity, but at Shinumu's words, all his earlier awe at standing upon an alien world rose up in him again. Beyond the clustered plastic bubbles of the post lay the rolling savannah, its yellow grasses bending in the breeze. And beyond that, low mountains, sharply peaked, bristling with pale ochreous trees, steep-sided, silent under the hazy sky. He remembered that he had expected the cloud canopy to be dark and oppressive, like a cloudy day on earth; instead, it was translucent and milky, oddly high, giving a silvery light as if the planet lay within a hollow pearl. Only the nights were pitchy dark, moonless and starless, and completely silent. He had even adjusted to the lesser gravity; thinking of that now, he was

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again conscious of the lightness of his body and the ease of his movements.

He said, "It's a beautiful sight. And now that we know how to handle the Slugs, it will make a beautiful world."

Shinumu turned round. His slanting black eyes were inscrutable; he regarded Cooper and then Darya. "That is true," he said. "I hope you will be ready for it."

Cooper nodded gravely. "I think we are learning."

He gave himself a little shake. "Is there anything you want, Mr. Shinumu? Anything we can get you to make you comfortable?"

"No. I wish to bathe and rest for a while."

"We'll leave you, then. One of us will be just outside the door at all times . . . in case you need anything."

"I understand." Shinumu smiled.

Cooper left Darya to stand the first guard, while he returned to the office. He got a little snack out of the files, made a stiffish Calvert and water, checked with Captain Labouchère to be sure everything was running smoothly, mopped up a bit of mayonnaise that had dripped on the front of his blouse, and strolled back along the edge of the post to the bubble that had been assigned to Shinumu.

The grass had been burned away from the edge of the post, and a ring of automatic warning beacons had been erected. Beyond them, the ground had been levelled and burned again for a distance of 500 yards; then, abruptly, the grass began, dotted here and there with groves of what they called trees—tall, slender, feathery things, actually a kind of fungus. Thinking of Shinumu's words, Cooper looked out towards the mountains, seeing the view once more as fantastic and unearthly. How quickly man could adapt to any circumstances! He himself had been on Venus almost from the beginning; he had felt then that he would never become reconciled to the strangeness of living on another planet, or breathing an alien air. But his muscles had grown used to the difference in weight, his eyes to the differences of light and color, his being to the oddness of another earth, and by now he was, as it were, at home.

Then he saw something that jolted him out of his reverie.

A stocky figure stood on the verge of the grass-land, nearly half a mile away. Cooper cupped his hands around his eyes and squinted. There was something familiar about it, even though he had seen it only for a few moments: the posture, the rather heavy-shouldered relaxation of it. Even at that distance, it was recognizably Shinumu, hands clasped behind his back, his head turning from side to side as if he were enjoying the view.

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Cooper hesitated. Then he turned away. Half a dozen long strides took him to the bubble where Darya was on guard, leaning against the door frame with her arms folded. She straightened when she saw him, but he brushed past her without a word. He flung open the door and went inside. It took no more than a glance to see that there was no one in the bubble.

Darya, at his heels, gasped, "Where—?"

"Out there," Cooper snapped. "What the hell was the idea, Captain?"

"I did not let him go out. Or, at any rate, I did not see him go."

"Get yourself some glasses, then."

He ran to the edge of the post. The little dark figure was still in sight, advancing into the grass, climbing a rolling hill. Cooper rushed across the open space and into the grass like a man breasting the sea. A clump of feathery fungus was between him and his quarry for a moment. When he had passed it, he stopped. Shinumu could no longer be seen.

Cooper rubbed his jaw reflectively. "Now what?" he mumbled.

Darya said, "Perhaps I can find his trail. I am fairly good at tracking."

He had forgotten her. He said, "Sorry I was so abrupt. But how the hell could you have let him out of your sight?"

"You should know me better—*sir*." she replied, in a hurt tone. "You did not look to see how he could have got out of the bubble. You only looked to see that he was gone."

"What do you mean?"

"There was a window. He might have slipped through it, and closed it when he was out. I did not think he would *want* to give me a slip, after all."

"*The* slip," Cooper said, automatically. "You're right. Why would he want to do that?" But in his heart, he thought he knew: the lure of standing upon another world had been very strong for him, too. And Shinumu had not struck him as the sort of man who would take tamely to the idea of being flanked by guards or guides, or ordered about, if he could escape it.

He weighed in his mind the advisability of going back to alert his team. But the Hopi could not be far away; he might be just over the crest of the hill. And Cooper did not like to admit that his own pride was at issue: the General had said, *personally* responsible.

"All right, come on," he said, at last. "Let's get him and get right back before the General finds out he's missing. I'd never hear the end of it."

He let Darya take the lead. She cast about for a moment, then pointed to a faint track where the

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grasses seemed to have been pushed aside. The tall, tough stalks sprang up as soon as they were thrust down, but Darya showed him one or two that had been broken. She marched confidently up the hill.

Beyond, the land dipped and rose again to a line of broken, rocky crags. On the right, the savannah spread away almost flat; on the left, the feathery clumps united in a pale tan-and-yellow forest in which were many genuine trees, and more clustered upon the flank of the low mountain ahead. But of Shinumu, there was no sign.

Darya crouched down and seemed almost to be sniffing the earth. Cooper had the odd feeling that she was hiding something from him with her body; there was something furtive about the way she kept her back to him. At length, she arose and said, "He went toward the forest."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

Cooper looked at her, doubtfully. She seemed very confident. On the other hand, he was unprepared for a trek into the bush. He had his little automatic under his arm, and his Morell on his hip in case they should meet a stray Slug, but almost nothing else. Yet he could not bring himself to believe that this would turn into an expedition. Shinumu *must* be very close. He might be able to travel rapidly, as an Indian presumably could, but he could not be too far away. If they should turn back now to get the team, something might happen to the visitor in the meanwhile.

"Okay," he said. "Let's get cracking."

She struck off toward the forest. She walked swiftly, stooping a little as if searching the ground. Cooper could see no trace that anyone had passed this way, but Darya did not hesitate; she went as if she were following a beaten path.

Almost an hour later, they had passed through the forest; they had climbed up spongy rocks covered with little blue and green lichens that crept in an uncanny way from surface to surface, come up through a pass between two sheer walls of stone, and were looking down into a narrow bowl, or valley, among steep low cliffs. Darya pointed.

"There he is!" she said.

"My God!" said Cooper. He fumbled for the Morell at his belt and began half sliding, half running, to descend the slope of scree into the valley.

Near a slender spire of rock stood the Hopi. And towering above him was a Slug.

The creature was difficult to see. Its thick, gelatinous skin rippled with iridescent colors, but colors in a spectrum disagreeable and hurtful to the eye—a strong ma-

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genta, a kind of strident orange, a revolting pink that made one's gorge rise. Its trail wound away behind it, a ribbon of mucous which dissolved the very pebbles and left them glistening sand. Its front half reared up, ridged and mottled in a kind of travesty of a face, but a face larger than life, like a face seen in a nightmare, and below it hung ambiguous tentacles, ropy strands like exposed viscera, which dragged on the ground, or writhed up suddenly and meaninglessly.

But above all else there was the odor, sickeningly sweet and putrid, changing in strength as the creature moved and as its colors shifted, an unbearable exhalation of rottenness so that you looked to see it drop to bits at any moment. And this odor clung to everything it touched, made the very corpses of one's friends sickening and loathesome, and of itself had driven wounded men to kill themselves.

Cooper's rush made the thing turn. From an aperture somewhere at its top, a yellow liquid spat out. He had been expecting it, and dodged. He heard the stuff strike with a crack like that of a rifle, against the rocks beyond.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Darya run out to flank the Slug. At the same time, he brought up his Morell and pressed the trigger viciously. Then he dodged again, running away from Darya so that she could fire from the other side in safety.

It was useless to shoot at a Slug with bullets or explosive charges, since these either passed right through it without harming it, or blew bits of it apart without disturbing its decentralized nervous system. But the Morell pistol fired tiny pellets of common rock-salt in a mass like that of the charge of a shotgun. Cooper's shot struck the middle of the thing. At once, its surface began to bubble and foam. Its odor became stronger, and it twisted and heaved itself about. Another yellow bolt of liquid shot from it, and another, but they were weaker and flew with less force. Cooper heard the click of Darya's pistol, and the Slug rose higher and fell, collapsing upon itself in a slushy mass. It grew smaller, and a burning and detestable liquid ran from it.

There was a series of popping noises. From somewhere in the thing, bright pink spheres emerged, were shot out like bullets. These were its spores, each capable of growing into an adult Slug. They were no larger than tennis balls, and there were perhaps half a dozen of them. Without another look at the dying monster, both Darya and Cooper set about collecting the spores; when they had them all, Cooper took a small metal vial from the butt of his pistol, unscrewed its cap, and poured a few drops of the chemi-

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cal it contained over the spheres. They burst and melted, sending up a foul steam.

Then only, panting and shuddering, they had leisure to look round for Shinumu.

"He must have been overwhelmed at the sight of the thing," Cooper said. "I don't blame him. I suppose, when it started bubbling, he took off."

He walked slowly back to the rocky spire where the Indian had been standing. "Mr. Shinumu!" he shouted. "Come on out!"

Darya, holstering her gun, came to stand beside him. "He was gone before we reached the Slug," he said.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I was behind you. Even before you started down the slope, he was gone. At the first sight of it, he must have run off. And yet, he did not look like a man overcome with fear when we first saw him."

Cooper cocked an eyebrow at her.

"I mean it, Gerbert," she said, giving the "H" its Russian gutteralization. "Think back to your first glimpse."

Cooper frowned, forcing his mind to reconstruct carefully the image he had seen: the Hopi standing before the pinnacle of rock, with the Slug rising over him. "You're right," he said. "I remember he had his hands behind his back, and that easy, relaxed air of a man who isn't worried a bit."

"Do not the Hopi dance with live rattlesnakes?"

"Yes. And Shinumu is a scientist besides. I suppose he isn't really afraid of anything. But—where is he, then?"

"Perhaps he does not want us to find him," said Darya, slowly.

Cooper stared at her. "Some kind of—spy?" he said.

Silently, she nodded.

"You're cuckoo," said Cooper. "You mean he's a Slug in sheep's clothing?"

"Perhaps something like that."

"Nonsense!" And because he was really worried, Cooper said something he regretted instantly, but could not stop. "You Russians see spies behind every bush—"

"And you Americans see nothing beyond your own complacent noses," Darya returned, angrily. "Could he not have some purpose which isn't friendly? He said in public many times that he owed no allegiance to any country. He is a member of a proud, defeated nation. Isn't it possible—?"

Cooper held up his hands. "Just a minute, Captain," he barked.

She stopped.

He drew a long sigh. Then he said, "First, I'm sorry, Darya. I shouldn't have raised that issue about Russians. God knows, I've scolded all of you on the team for such things. But—second—I don't think Shinumu is like that."

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"You mean you can't believe him to be."

"Well, yes, if you prefer. I admit I form quick judgments of people, but you know me well enough to know that I'm usually right. I don't see him as a spy. I really think you're being overly suspicious."

Darya thrust out her lower lip. "And you think this is a Russian habit, is that so, Major?"

"I said I was sorry," Cooper snapped. "Let's drop it. I don't know what Shinumu is. Maybe he *is* a Slug inside a—a plastic human body. But we've got to find him. Shall we go back and get help? Or shall we keep on looking? The most likely thing, in spite of your suspicion, is that he slipped out of the way of danger."

"Then why does he not come out, now?"

"Probably realized that he shouldn't be out here, and headed back for the post. Or he may have gone to get help."

"Then let me look around to find his trail again."

"All right. Go ahead."

He watched her closely. And once again, he had the curious feeling that she did not want him to see what she was doing. It was not altogether his imagination that she turned her back on him when she crouched, and that as she searched about near the spire of rock she kept it turned. He was on the point of saying something about it, when she rose abruptly and said, "You may be right, that he was in a panic. He did not go toward the post, but away from it —there." And she waved at the continuing mountains, whose sharp ridges and fractures rose above the little valley.

"Hmm." Cooper put away his Morell, and wiped his hands on the front of his once-immaculate tunic. He was looking more like himself: dirty, scratched, and bedraggled. "You're a good woodsman, Darya."

"Yes. I used to be a hunter. My father took me to hunt deer with him with the bow; it was his sport."

"I see. All right, let's chance it and follow him. He can't have gone far."

With Darya in the lead once more, they set themselves to climb a wide shelf that led upward from the valley. It was not very steep and brought them soon to a ridge that knifed northward. At one point, Darya paused and pointed to the ground. Cooper could see nothing in particular, and said so.

"Do you not notice, Gerbert, how the pebbles have slid away, here? Someone stepped carelessly and dislodged a stone which sent pebbles and sand rolling."

"Yes, now that you mention it, I guess so."

"I know so. He went this way."

They went on, and from time to

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time Cooper put his hands to his mouth and shouted, "Mr. Shinumu!" His voice rang among the hills, but there was no answer.

They followed a fault down across a wide, bald face of rock and came to a swift little brook. They crossed it and went through what was almost an earth meadow except that it was full of fluttering things like multi-winged butterflies, each one anchored to a delicate, hairlike stalk six or eight inches high. When the two passed, these creatures set up a frightened keening, straining away on their stalks until the whole field shimmered as if a wind were blowing.

They entered another forest, this one chiefly composed of low trees with enormous, notched leaves, pale green, almost familiar except for the ground which was covered with a thick, springy mat of some kind of bright red moss which gave all the air a murky look. They were not as tired as they would have been on earth, because of the lesser gravity, but they were both becoming somewhat winded. Then, suddenly, two things happened almost simultaneously.

First, Darya stopped short and said, "He is gone!"

"What?" Cooper exclaimed. "What do you mean, gone?"

And even as he said it, there came a shriek that froze them both. Cooper, who had seen more action on the planet than Darya, recognized it at once. He drew his automatic, although the gesture was utterly futile. There was no time for anything else.

Several low trees snapped off and crashed to the ground. A shape like that of a python, but incredibly fat and swollen, whipped into view. Darya screamed. Cooper emptied his automatic, but he might as well have been shooting at the mountain behind them. The thing, travelling with elephantine speed and hugeness, shrieked again. Its tail swung. Cooper fell flat and the tail sang through the air over him. Splinters of wood flew and bit his back. Then the monster was gone, with a cracking and creashing of trees in its wake.

When the ground ceased shaking, Cooper rolled over and sat up dizzily. The first thing he saw was Darya, lying on her face in the moss. The red plants reflected upon her so that she might have been lying in blood.

He staggered up and went to her. Very gently, he turned her over. She groaned, and looked at him, her face twitching.

"Yes. My arm and shoulder. And when I fell, my leg broke. I felt it . . . and heard it."

Her voice was faint, but firm. Cooper had chosen the members of his team well.

Very carefully, with his knife, he cut open the sleeve of her

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tunic. Her shoulder was purple, and splinters of white bone protruded from her bloody upper arm. He cut open her trouser and saw from the odd angle of her foot that her leg was indeed broken, as well. He made her as comfortable as he could, covering her with his tunic.

"I know first aid," he said, "but I'm not going to try to set all this stuff. I might botch it, and then where'd you be? All your girlish charm gone . . ."

She smiled feebly. "All right, Gerbert," she said. "Have you a cigarette?"

He lit one and put it in her mouth. "I can't carry you, either—I don't think," he said.

"No. But you can go back and get help. I will be all right."

He grinned at her. "It'll be night very soon," he said. "I'm not going to leave you alone."

"Gerbert—"

"Shut up, Captain. That's an order. Anyway—" He smiled, wryly. "I must confess to you, I got a D-minus in tracking and trailing. I was more or less relying on you to back-track and get us home. I don't think I can find the way."

She was silent. He lit a cigarette for himself, and searched his pockets. "Not a thing to eat, either. That's because I wanted to look all streamlined and beautiful. After this, I'll know better. I wonder if this moss is edible."

She said, "Listen, Gerbert. If you stay with me, how good are our chances?"

He began to smile, and say, "Don't be silly," but looking at her, he checked himself. Her face was pale, all eyes it seemed, and her usually glossy brown curls were lank and wet with perspiration. He knew what an effort of will it cost her to lie quietly, without morphine.

"I'll tell you the truth, Darya," he said. "I haven't the faintest idea. Very few people have spent the night out alone on the planet, unsheltered and unarmed. I've been here since the beginning, and during the past nine months we've learned a lot about this continent we're on, but not everything, by a long shot. Lots of soldiers have trained in army camps, and lived in foreign lands for a year or more, and still don't know all the flora and fauna, not even when they bivouac in the field for weeks, or fight over a piece of land for months. We know about the Slugs, and that's . . ."

His voice died away. But he knew she was thinking as he was: if we missed that one Slug, there might be others. And in the night, they can see—or whatever it is they do—as well as by day.

"I'd better build a fire, to start with," he said. "It'll make things more cheery. Then I can try cooking up some of this moss. Moss *à la mode de Caen;* how about that?"

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She rolled her head slowly from side to side. "*Nyet,*" she whispered. "*Nye zastavayet povyerit.*"

"Just like a Russian," he said, trying to laugh, hoping to catch her attention and draw her back to him, for she had become dreadfully pale and limp. "Always *nyet.*"

"Sorry," she said. "Listen, Gerbert. You can go back. Leave me here. It is foolish for you to stay and die."

"Darya," he said, "you've got to keep still and save your strength. I'm not going back without you."

She stared at him, and slowly her eyes filled with tears. "I want you to go," she said. "I—I feel for you—very much affection."

He bit his lip. Then he said, gently, "Even though I'm such a slob?"

"Always you are joking," she said.

"I only joke about it because it's hard to believe. I never thought—"

"But it is true."

She lifted her uninjured hand a trifle. "Look on my wrist," she said.

He did so, and found a small metal and plastic disk, strapped like a watch to her arm. It had a knurled knob on one side, and two tiny dials, one with a black, the other with a red needle.

"It is a—well, what you would call a 'private eye,'" Darya said, with the ghost of a chuckle. "My superior gave it to me when I was transferred to you. It can be set to pick up the electrical impulses of a particular brain, and may then be used to trail a person. It was given to me so that I could—keep an eye on you. But I did not use it, Gerbert, because of how we work here, as a team; I did not want to have something secret. Only when Mr. Shinumu was to arrive, I thought, here is something very useful . . ."

"You thought right," said Cooper. He took her hand. "And all those hunting trips with your father—"

"No, those are true. He did take me hunting. I am a good woodsman."

Cooper thought of something. "What did you mean," he asked, "when, just before that thing rushed out at us, you said, 'He is gone?' Were you talking about Shinumu?"

"Yes. It was so queer. I was following the needle, and suddenly his trace vanished. Just—stopped."

"Hmm. Interesting. The only way he might go would be up. I wonder if something came down out of the sky and snatched him away?"

He looked down at her, and his heart stopped. Her eyes had closed, and for an instant she looked so wan and still that he thought she was dead. "Darya!"

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Her eyelids flickered. "Go," she said. "Take the eye . . . go quickly . . ."

Cooper held her hand tightly in both of his. For once, he was at a loss. If it had been anyone but Darya, he might have been able to leave, knowing that his own safety must come first, that his basic responsibility was to his commander and his unit. But he found, suddenly, that he no longer cared for anything but her life. Somehow, he must get her away. He would have to pray that none of the splintered bone in her shoulder pierced her chest.

He bent over her. "Darya," he said, softly. "I'm going to splint your leg. Then I'm going to try to carry you."

And then a pleasant, rather husky voice said, "That will not be necessary."

Cooper looked up. A familiar figure stood nearby, a stocky, brown-skinned man with twinkling, heavy-lidded eyes and straight black hair. "Mr. Shinumu!" he said.

"No," said the other. "I am not Mr. Shinumu, as you call him. I am one of his brothers."

Cooper stared, and the world became unreal. He began to laugh, and he said, idiotically, "Don't tell me the Hopis got to Venus first!"

The other chuckled. "Let me look at your friend," he said.

He came forward and knelt beside Darya. He touched her shoulder, and peered at her leg; he put his hand on her cheek, and felt the pulse in her throat. She stirred, and whispered, "Gerbert . . ."

The man turned his head and said something in a pleasant, liquid language over his shoulder. Several other people came silently out of the rusty shadows of the wood. Two were men, three were women, all with the same quiet, brown faces and slightly slanted eyes. They moved with grace and softness; it was the naturalness and relaxation of their movements that made them seem slow and a little stolid. Men and women alike were dressed in simple, one-piece coveralls, rather loose and soft, and colored in melting forest tints.

The three women knelt around Darya. One put her hands under the girl's head, the second put her hands on Darya's legs, the third put a hand on each of the other's shoulders. They looked at each other and smiled, and seemed to draw deep breaths; then abruptly, all three, and Darya as well, vanished.

"Don't be alarmed," the first man said to Cooper. "We will take you, now, to our own place. Stand up, please."

Cooper did so. The two newcomers joined hands, and each took one of his hands. They looked into his eyes, soberly. He felt no

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sensation of motion, only a slight dizziness, and then he was standing in a small, bare, clean room with green walls and a polished floor. There were square cushions on the floor, and the first man sat down on one, and motioned Cooper to make himself comfortable.

"Your friend," he said, "is in our hospital—at least, that is how you would think of it. She will be well taken care of."

"Good," said Cooper. "Thanks, Mr.—er—?"

"I am named Atargas."

Cooper dropped to a cushion and looked about him. One wall was open to a view of mountains and pale sky. Opposite it, there was a black chest bound with what appeared to be silver, and on it a single, round, glowing stone. The simplicity and barrenness of the room reminded him of Japanese houses. He said, "May I smoke?"

"Of course, if you wish."

He slowly took out a crumpled cigarette, his last, and lit it with hands that shook. Then he said, hoarsely, "All right, now, for God's sake, tell me what this is all about." He felt that in another moment he would lose his grip on reality altogether.

The other man seemed to sense this; he reached out a hand and touched Cooper lightly on the knee. "I am sorry," he said. "We were not quite ready to reveal ourselves. But we could not leave your friend to die. As for you, you would have been perfectly safe. There were no more *eleutha* in that region."

"*Eleutha*? Is that what you call that enormous thing that knocked us over?"

"Oh, no. That one is a mild, herbivorous beast—*namak*, he is called—which grazes on the tops of those trees. It is very timid. Your voices frightened it, and of course it fled. It would not willingly have hurt you. No, the *eleutha* are what you call Slugs."

He paused, and sighed. "That is why we brought you here in the first place," he said.

"Brought us here?" Cooper rubbed his face vigorously, and said, "Please. Start from the beginning. Or else, don't explain anything at all. Just let me go quietly mad."

Atargas grinned. "You will not go mad," he said. "You are, in fact, one of the sanest people I have met. That is why I think this will all work out well.

"To begin with, my people are the natives of this planet; at least, we are one of the races. We are an old people, and we have lived in peace for many centuries. We need very little, and there are not many of us. We live for a long time, by your standards. What is more, we have learned certain—techniques, I suppose you could say—methods of exchanging ideas

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without words, ways of handling matter without the use of large, cumbersome machines, ways of moving ourselves from place to place—it is too difficult to explain briefly."

"Ways of moving yourself—you mean, the way in which Darya and I were brought here?"

"Just so. Well, some while ago, the *eleutha* came here. Their spores drifted in space, for as you know they are not easily harmed by heat or cold, or airlessness, although you have learned to destroy them with chemicals. They began to breed, and soon they were ruining many of the most lovely and productive places of our world."

"But—with all your knowledge, don't tell me you couldn't have found a way of exterminating them," Cooper exclaimed.

"Oh, yes. We knew ways of exterminating them. But we do not ourselves kill other living things," said Atargas, calmly.

"Not at all?"

"No. It is impossible for us to do so. It is not in our natures. Not one of us could press the trigger of a weapon. It is how we are made."

"Not even if your lives are threatened?"

"Not even then. But our lives were not threatened. The *eleutha* are repulsive to us, but they cannot harm us, since we do not fear them. They react only to fear; they sense it, and defend themselves. If they should wish to harm us, in any case, we would simply—depart.

"We could not kill them. But we could change the ecology of our planet so that it became hostile to them. On your earth, Sparagnos tells me—I mean, Shinumu, to use the name by which you know him—they sometimes combat plagues of insects by bringing in other insects which are the natural enemies of the first. For instance, to destroy a species of aphid which attacked wheat, one of your countries brought in ladybird beetles, which kept down the numbers of the aphids. . . . That is what *we* determined to do.

"We sent one of our number, a brilliant young man who had specialized in the study of mathematics and physics, to your planet. Distance does not affect our technique of transportation; we can go as easily a million miles as one mile, and your planet was no stranger to us. Many of our people had been there in the past. We had long known that there were races upon your planet which resembled us, among them the Hopi—indeed, in their peacefulness, and their myths and customs, they resembled us so nearly that some of our anthropologists hold they may be descended from ancestors of ours who in earliest days discovered the principle of teleportation.

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"We approached them, and when they understood that our plan might bring peace to your earth and unite some of your warring nations, they agreed to it. Sparagnos took a Hopi name, and lived among them so that he could give your people the system of space travel you now use. You came here; you met the *eleutha*, and feared them, and hated them. You are their natural enemy, and since you are intelligent beings and they are not, it was foredoomed that you would wipe them out.

"I am sorry that you and your friend had to meet with trouble. It was Sparagnos' fault. When you left him alone he could not resist the temptation to wander once more on the soil of Alathu—as we call our world—to breathe the air of his home. He went for a walk."

"I understand," Cooper said, in a somewhat dazed voice. "If someone put me down on earth right now, it's what I'd do."

"Yes. He did not think you could keep following him, but when he understood that somehow you were able to do so, he decided to transport himself back to the dwelling you had given him on the army post, and sent his mind out to mine to tell me to help you."

"I see. And—and that's where he is now? On the post?"

"Yes. He wanted to be there, to avoid great confusion and trouble. But—I am afraid he was not altogether successful, Mr. Cooper. He told me, a short time ago, that your commander became very annoyed with you when he discovered that you and your friend were missing."

"Annoyed . . ." Cooper snorted. He rose to his feet. "I've got to get back, Mr. Atargas. What about Darya?"

"Your friend will be well, and whole again. Do not worry about her."

He took Cooper by the arm and led him to the open wall. "You see," he said, smiling, "some of us were disturbed at the plan because we thought, What if these men we bring in to destroy the *eleutha*, then prove hostile to us? Will we not have exchanged Torgos for Mandyllus . . . er . . . a rather difficult allusion to explain . . . one of our myths."

"The frying pan for the fire, we say."

"Exactly. But Sparagnos told us that we need not upset ourselves. And indeed, observing you all, seeing how well you work together, and seeing also your loyalty and affection for your friend, Darya, we think that perhaps there will be room on our world for us and for you."

Cooper looked into the level, calm eyes of the other. "I'm sure of it," he said. "We'll work it out."

"Good. Two of us will take you back to your post, Mr. Cooper,

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and explain to your commander all that I have told you. Perhaps he will forgive you."

"It's going to take some explaining," said Cooper. "He isn't going to like it, not at first—learning that we're only a kind of insect, brought in to combat another insect pest."

Atargas motioned, and another man entered the room softly. They gripped Cooper's hands in their own. Cooper suddenly began to laugh helplessly, and found himself still laughing before the desk of General Fulke-Edwards.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, weakly, as the General began to explode. "I can't help it. I have just discovered that we are the lesser of two weevils."

The general stared, immobilized, clearly torn between an honest desire to commit justified homicide, and awareness of his duty to order instant confinement in the mental ward of the base hopital.

Major Cooper, feeling it only kind to grant the general a few moments to recover, set off briskly in search of the nearest snack.

***To be sure . . .***

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*Though it doesn't immediately sound like it, the difference between one sextillionth of a second and one ten-billionth of a second is equivalent to that between one day and thirty billion years. . . .*

# THE ULTIMATE SPLIT OF THE SECOND

*by Isaac Asimov*

OCCASIONALLY, I GET AN IDEA FOR a new gimmick. Not necessarily for a science-fiction story, either. Sometimes, the gimmick actually involves what I call "straight science."

I have such a thing now and I'm going to tell you about it.

The notion came to me some time ago, when the news broke that a subatomic particle called "xi-zero" (with "xi" pronounced "ksee," if you speak Greek, and "zigh" if you speak English) had been detected for the first time. Like other particles of its general nature, it is strangely stable, having a half-life of fully a ten-billionth ($10^{-10}$) of a second or so.

The last sentence may seem misprinted and you may think that I meant to writ "*un*stable," but no! A ten-billionth of a second can be a long time; it all depends on the scale of reference. Compared to a sextillionth ($10^{-23}$) of a second; a ten-billionth ($10^{-10}$) of a second is an eon. The difference between those two intervals of time is as that between one day and thirty billion years.

You may grant this and yet feel an onset of dizziness. The world of split-seconds; of split-split-split-seconds is a difficult one to visualize. It



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is easy to say "a sextillionth of a second" and just as easy to say "a ten-billionth of a second" and no matter how easily we juggle the symbols representing such time intervals, it is impossible (or *seems* impossible) to visualize either.

My gimmick is intended to make split-seconds more visualizable, and I got the idea from the device used in a realm of measurement that is also grotesque and also outside the range of all common experience—that of astronomical distances.

There is nothing strange in saying, "Vega is a very near-by star. It's not very much more than a hundred fifty trillion ($1.5 \times 10^{14}$) miles away."

Most of us who read s.f. are well-used to the thought that a hundred fifty trillion miles is a very small distance on the cosmic scale. The bulk of the stars in our galaxy are something like two hundred quadrillion ($2 \times 10^{17}$) miles away and the nearest full-sized outside galaxy is more than ten quintillion ($10^{19}$) miles away.

Trillion, quadrillion and quintillion are all legitimate number-words and there's no difficulty telling which is larger and by how much, if you simply want to manipulate symbols. Visualization of what they mean, however, is another thing.

So the trick is to make use of the speed of light to bring the numbers down to vest-pocket size. It doesn't change the actual distance any, but it's easier to make some sort of mental adjustment to the matter if all the zeroes of the "illions" aren't getting in the way.

The velocity of light, in a vacuum, is 186,274 miles per second or, in the metric system, 299,779 kilometers per second.[1]

A "light-second," then, can be defined as that distance through which light (in a vacuum) will travel in a second of time, and is equal to 186,274 miles or to 299,779 kilometers.

It is easy to build longer units in this system. A "light-minute" is equal to 60 light-seconds; a "light-hour" is equal to 60 light-minutes; and so on till you reach the very familiar "light-year," which is the distance through which light (in a vacuum) will travel in a year. This distance is equal to 5,890,000,000,000 miles or to 9,460,000,000,000 kilometers. If you are content with round numbers, you can consider a light-year equal to 6 trillion ($6 \times 10^{12}$) miles or to 9½ trillion ($9.5 \times 10^{12}$) kilometers.

You can go on, if you please, to "light-centuries" and "light-millennia," but hardly anyone ever does. Light-year is the unit of preference

[1] See addendum at end of this article.

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for astronomic distances. (There is also the "parsec," which is equal to 3.26 light years, or roughly 20 trillion miles, but that is a unit based on a different principle, and we need not worry about it here.)

Using light-years as the unit, we can say that Vega is 27 light-years from us, and that this is a small distance, considering that the bulk of the stars of our galaxy are 35,000 light-years away and the nearest full-sized outside galaxy is 2,100,000 light-years away. The difference between 27 and 35,000 and 2,100,000, given our range of experience, is easier to visualize than that between a hundred fifty trillion and two hundred quadrillion and ten quintillion, though the ratios in both cases are the same.

Furthermore, the use of the speed of light in defining units of distance has the virtue of simplifying certain connections between time and distance.

For instance, suppose an expedition on Jupiter's satellite Ganymede is, at a certain time, 500,000,000 miles from Earth. (The distance, naturally, varies with time as both worlds move about in their orbits.) This distance can also be expressed as 44.8 light-minutes.

What is the advantage of the latter? For one thing, 44.8 is an easier number to say and handle than 500,000,000. For another, suppose our expedition is in radio communication with Earth. A message sent from Ganymede to Earth (or vice-versa) will take 44.8 minutes to arrive. The use of light-units expresses distance *and* speed of communication at the same time.

(In fact, in a world in which interplanetary travel is a taken-for-granted fact, I wonder if the astronauts won't start measuring distance in "radio-minutes," rather than light-minutes. Same thing, of course, but more to the point.)

Then, when and if interstellar travel comes to pass, making use of velocities at near the speed of light, another advantage will come to light. If time dilatation exists and the experience of time is slowed at high velocities, a trip to Vega may seem to endure for only a month or for only a week. To the stay-at-homes on Earth, however, who are experiencing "objective time" (the kind of time that is experienced at low velocities—strictly speaking, at zero velocity) the trip to Vega, 27 light-years distant, cannot take place in less than 27 years. A rod-tripper, no matter how quickly the journey has seemed to pass for him will find his friends on Earth a minimum of 54 years older. In the same way, a trip to the Andromeda Galaxy cannot take less than 2,100,000 years of objective time, it being 2,100,000 light-years distant. Once again, time and distance are simultaneously expressed.

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My gimmick, then, is to apply this same principle to the realm of ultra-short intervals of time.

Instead of concentrating on the tremendously long distances light can cover in ordinary units of time; why not concentrate on the tremendously short times required for light to cover ordinary units of distance.

If we're going to speak of a light second as equal to the distance covered by light (in a vacuum) in one second and set it equal to 186,273 miles; why not speak of a "light-mile" as equal to the time required for light (in a vacuum) to cover a distance of 1 mile, and set that equal to 1/186,273 seconds.

Why not, indeed? The only drawback is that 186,273 is such an uneven number. However, by a curious coincidence undreamt of by the inventors of the metric system, the speed of light is very close to 300,000 kilometers per second, so that a "light-kilometer" is equal to 1/300,000 of a second. It comes out even rounder if you noted that 3⅓ light-kilometers is equal to just about 0.00001 or $10^{-5}$ seconds.

Furthermore, to get to still smaller units of time, it is only necessary to consider light as covering smaller and smaller distances.

Thus, 1 kilometer ($10^5$ centimeters) is equal to a million millimeters; and 1 millimeter ($10^{-1}$ centimeters) is equal to a million millimicrons. To go one step further down, we can say that 1 millimicron ($10^{-7}$ centimeters) is equal to a million fermis. (The name "fermi" has been suggested, but has not yet been officially adopted, as far as I know, for a unit of length equal to a millionth of a millimicron, or to $10^{-13}$ centimeters. It is derived, of course, from the late Enrico Fermi, and I will accept the name for the purposes of this article.)

So we can set up a little table of light-units for ultra-short intervals of time, beginning with a light-kilometer, which is itself equal to only 1/300,000 of a second.

1 light-kilometer =1,000,000 light-millimeters

1 light-millimeter =1,000,000 light-millimicrons

1 light-millimicron=1,000,000 light-fermis

To relate this units to conventional units of time, we need only set up another short table:

3⅓ light-kilometers =$10^{-5}$ seconds (i.e. a hundred-thousandth of a second)

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3⅓ light-millimeters=$10^{-11}$ seconds (i.e. a hundred-billionth of a second)

3⅓ light-millicrons =$10^{-17}$ seconds (i.e. a hundred-quadrillionth of a second)

3⅓ light-fermis =$10^{-23}$ seconds (i.e. a hundred-sextillionth of a second)

But why stop at the light-fermi? We can proceed on downwards, dividing by a million indefinitely.

Well, consider the fermi, again. It is equal to $10^{-13}$ centimeters, a ten-trillionth of a centimeter. What is interesting about this particular figure, and why the name of an atomic physicist should have been suggested for the unit, is that $10^{-13}$ centimeters is also the approximate diameter of the various subatomic particles.

A light-fermi, therefore, is the time required for a ray of light to travel from one end of a proton to the other. The light-fermi is the time required for the fastest known motion to cover the smallest tangible distance. Until the day comes that we discover something faster than the speed of light or something smaller than subatomic particles, we are not likely ever to have to deal with an interval of time smaller than the light-fermi. As of now, the light-fermi is the ultimate split of the second.

Of course, you may wonder what can happen in the space of a light-fermi. And if something did happen in that unimaginably small interval, how could we tell it didn't take place in a light-milimicron which is also unimaginably small, for all it is equal to a million light-fermis?

Well, consider high-energy particles. These (if the energy is high enough) travel with almost the speed of light. And when one of these particles approaches another at such a speed, a reaction often takes place between them, as a result of mutual "nuclear forces" coming into play.

Nuclear forces, however, are very short range. Their strength falls off with distance so rapidly that the forces are only appreciable within 1 or 2 fermis distance of any given particle.

We have here, then, the case of two particles passing at the speed of light and able to interact only while within a couple of fermis of each other. It would only take them a couple of light-fermis to enter and leave that tiny zone of interaction at the tremendous speed at which they are moving. Yet reactions *do* take place!

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Nuclear reactions taking place in light-fermis of time are classed as "strong interactions." They are the results of forces that can make themselves felt in the most evanescent imaginable interval and these are the strongest forces we know of. Nuclear forces of this sort are, in fact, about 135 times as strong as the electromagnetic forces with which we are familiar.

Scientists adjusted themselves to this fact and were prepared to have any nuclear reactions involving individual subatomic particles take only light-fermis of time to transpire.

But then complications arose. When particles were slammed together with sufficient energy to undergo strong interactions, new particles not previously observed were created in the process, and were detected. Some of these new particles (first observed in 1950) amazed scientists by proving to be very massive. They were distinctly more massive, in fact, than neutrons or protons, which, until then, had been the most massive particles known.

These super-massive particles are called "hyperons" (the prefix "hyper-" coming from Greek and meaning "over," "above," "beyond"). There are three classes of these hyperons, distinguished by being given the names of different Greek letters. There are the lambda particles, which are about 12 percent heavier than the proton; the sigma particles, which are about 13 percent heavier; and the xi particles, which are about 14 percent heavier.

There were theoretical reasons for suspecting that one pair of lambda particles existed, three pairs of sigma-particles and two pairs of xi-particles. These differ among themselves in the nature of their electric charge, and in the fact that one of each pair is an "anti-particle." One by one, each of the hyperons was detected in actual practice, and in early 1959 when the xi-zero particle was detected, that was the last of them. The roster was complete.

The hyperons as a whole, however, were odd little creatures. They didn't last long, only for unimaginably small fractions of a second. To scientists, however, they seemed to last very long indeed, for nuclear forces were involved in their breakdown, which should therefore have taken place in light-fermis of time.

But they didn't. Even the most unstable of all the hyperons, the sigma-zero particle, must last at least as long as a quintillionth of a second. Put that way, it sounds like a satisfactorily short period of time; not long enough to get really bored in—until the interval is converted from conventional units to light-units. A quintillionth of a second is equal to 30,000 light-fermis.

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Too long!

And even so, 30,000 light-fermis represent an extraordinarily short lifetime for a hyperon. The others, including the recently-discovered xi-zero particle, have half-lives of about 30,000,000,000,000 light-fermis, or 30 light-millimeters.

Since the nuclear forces bringing about the breakdown of hyperons is at least ten trillion times as long an interval of time as that required to form them, those forces must be that much weaker than those involved in the "strong interactions." Naturally, the new forces are spoken of as being involved in the "weak interactions," and they are weak indeed, being almost a trillion times weaker than even electromagnetic forces.

In fact, the new particles which were involved in "weak interactions" were called "strange particles," partly because of this, and the name has stuck. Every particle is now given a "strangeness number," which may be +1, 0, -1, or -2.

Ordinary particles such as protons and neutrons have strangeness numbers of 0; lambda and sigma particles have strangeness numbers of -1, xi particles have strangeness numbers of -2 and so on. Exactly what the strangness number signifies is not yet exactly understood—but work with it now and figure it out later.

The path and the activities of the various hyperons (and of the other subatomic particles as well) are followed by their effects upon the air molecules with which they collide. Such a collision usually involves merely the tearing off of an electron or two from the air molecules. What is left of the molecule is a charged "ion."

An ion is much more efficient as a center about which a water droplet can form, than is the original uncharged molecule. If a speeding particle collides with molecules in a sample of air which is supercharged with water vapor (as in a Wilson cloud-chamber) each ion that is produced is immediately made the center of a water droplet. The moving particle marks its path, therefore, with a delicate line of water drops. When the particle breaks down into two other particles, moving off in two different directions, the line of water gives this away by splitting into a Y.

It all happens instantaneously to our merely human senses. Still photograph upon photograph of the tracks that result will allow nuclear physicists to deduce the chain of events that produced the different track-patterns.

Only sub-atomic particles that are themselves charged are very effi-

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cient in knocking electrons out of the edges of air molecules. For that reason, only charged particles can be followed by the water-traceries. And, also for that reason, in any class of particles, the uncharged or neutral varieties are the last to be detected.

The uncharged neutron, for instance, was not discovered until 18 years after the discovery of the similar, but electrically charged, proton. And in the case of the hyperons, the last to be found was xi-zero, one of the uncharged varieties. (The "zero" means "zero charge.")

Yet the uncharged particles can be detected by the very absence of a trace. For instance, the xi-zero particle was formed from a charged particle and broke down, eventually, into another type of charged particle. In the photograph that finally landed the jackpot (about 70,000 were examined) there were lines of droplets separated by a significant gap! That gap could not be filled by any known uncharged particle; for any of those would have brought about a different type of gap or a different sequence of events at the conclusion of the gap. Only the xi-zero could be made to fit and so, in this thoroughly negative manner, the final particle was discovered.

And where do the light-units I'm suggesting come in? Why, consider, a particle travelling at almost the speed of light has a chance, if its life-time is about 30 light-millimeters, to travel 30 light-millimeters before breaking down.

The one implies the other. By using conventional units, you might say that a length of water droplets of about 30 millimeters implies a half-life of about a trillionth of a second (or vice-versa) but there is no obvious connection between the two numerical values. To say that a track of 30 millimeters implies a half-life of 30 light-millimeters is equally true, and how neatly tied in. Once again, as in the case of astronomical distances, the use of the speed of light allows one number to express both distance and time.

A group of particles which entered the scene earlier than the hyperons are the "mesons." These are middle-weight particles, lighter than protons or neutrons, but heavier than electrons.

There are three known varieties of these particles, too. The two lighter varieties are also distinguished by means of Greek letters. They are the mu-mesons, discovered in 1935, which are about 0.11 as massive as a proton, and the pi-mesons, discovered in 1947, which are about 0.15 as massive as protons. Finally, beginning in 1949, various species of unusually heavy mesons, the K-mesons, were discovered. These are about 0.53 as massive as protons.

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On the whole, the mesons are less unstable than the hyperons. They have longer half-lives. Whereas even the most stable of the hyperons has a half-life of only 30 light-millimeters; the meson half-lives generally range from that value up through 8,000 light-millimeters for those pi-mesons carrying an electric charge, to 800,000 light-millimeters for the mu-mesons.

By now, the figure of 800,000 light-millimeters ought to give you the impression of a long half-life indeed, so I'll just remind you that by conventional units it is the equivalent of 1/500,000 of a second.

A short time to us, but a long, lo-o-o-ong time on the nuclear scale.

Of the mesons, it is only the K-variety that comes under the heading of strange particles. The K-plus and K-zero mesons have a strangeness number of +1, and the K-minus meson, a strangeness number of -1.

It is the weak interactions, by the way, that recently opened the door to a revolution in physics. For the first eight years or so after their discovery, the weak interactions had seemed to be little more than confusing nuisances. Then in 1957, as a result of studies involving them, the "law of conservation of parity" was shown not to apply to all processes in nature.

I won't go into the details of that, but it's perhaps enough to say that the demonstration thunderstruck physicists, that the two young Chinese students who turned the trick (the older one was in his middle thirties) were promptly awarded the Nobel Prize; and that a whole new horizon seems to be opening up in nuclear theory as a result.

Aside from the mesons and hyperons, there is only one unstable particle known—the neutron. Within the atomic nucleus the neutron is stable, but in isolation, it eventually breaks down to form a proton, an electron and a neutrino. (Of course, antiparticles such as positrons and antiprotons are unstable in the sense that they will react with electrons and protons, respectively. Under ordinary circumstances this will happen in a millionth of a second or so. However, if these antiparticles were in isolation, they would remain as they were indefinitely, and that is what we mean by stability.)

The half-life of the neutron breakdown is 1,010 seconds (or about 17 minutes), and this is about a billion times longer than the half-life of the breakdown of any other known particle.

In light-units, the half-life of the neutron would be 350,000,000 kilometers. In other words, if a number of neutrons were speeding at the velocity of light, they would travel 350,000,000 kilometers (from one

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extreme of earth's orbit to the other, plus a little extra) before half had broken down.

Of course, neutrons as made use of by scientists don't go at anything like the speed of light. In fact, the neutrons that are particularly useful in initiating uranium fission are very slow-moving neutrons that don't move any faster than air-molecules do. Their speed is roughly a mile a second.

Even at that creep, a stream of neutrons would travel a thousand miles before half had broken down. And in that thousand miles, many other things have a chance to happen to them.

For instance if they're travelling through uranium or plutonium, they have a chance to be absorbed by nuclei and to initiate fission.

And to help make the confusing and dangerous—but exciting—world we live in today.

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## ADDENDUM

Some of you may be confused by (or allergic to) metric units. Consequently, I have no objection to putting some of the units in terms of inches and miles for the enlightenment of all.

For instance, 1 kilometer equals 0.621 miles or just about 1,100 yards.

As for the small units:

1 inch is equal to 254 millimeters
It is also equal to 254,000,000 millimicrons
And to 254,000,000,000,000 fermis.

In other words, if you took 254,000,000,000,000 (two hundred fifty-four trillion) protons and laid them end to end, they would form a line about an inch long.

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*Here is a story to set beside Judith Merril's classic "That Only a Mother." Mrs. Emshwiller also considers the (increasingly probable) problem of mutation, and she too, in her own admirable manner, pictures movingly the endurance and adaptability of the human spirit.*

# DAY AT THE BEACH

*by Carol Emshwiller*

"It's Saturday," the absolutely hairless woman said, and she pulled at her frayed, green kerchief to make sure it covered her head. "I sometimes forget to keep track of the days, but I marked three more off on the calender because I think that's how many I forgot, so this *must* be Saturday."

Her name was Myra and she had neither eyebrows nor lashes nor even a faint, transparent down along her cheeks. Once she had had long, black hair, but now, looking at her pink, bare face, one would guess she had been a redhead.

Her equally hairless husband, Ben, sprawled at the kitchen table waiting for breakfast. He wore red plaid Bermuda shorts, rather faded, and a tee shirt with a large hole under the arm. His skull curved above his staring eyes more naked-seeming than hers because he wore no kerchief or hat.

"We used to always go out on Saturdays," she said, and she put a bowl of oatmeal at the side of the table in front of a youth chair.

Then she put the biggest bowl between her husband's elbows.

"I have to mow the lawn this morning," he said. "All the more so if it's Saturday."

She went on as if she hadn't heard. "A day like today we'd go to the beach. I forget a lot of things, but I remember that."

"If I were you, I just wouldn't think about it." Ben's empty eyes finally focused on the youth chair and he turned then to the open window behind him and yelled, "Littleboy, Littleboy," making the sound run together all L's and Y. "Hey, it's breakfast, Boy," and under his breath he said, "He won't come."

"But I *do* think about it. I remember hot dogs and clam chowder and how cool it was days like this. I don't suppose I even have a



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bathing suit around anymore."

"It wouldn't be like it used to be."

"Oh, the sea's the same. That's one thing sure. I wonder if the boardwalk's still there."

"Hah," he said. "I don't have to see it to know it's all gone for fire wood. It's been four winters now."

She sat down, put her elbows on the table and stared at her bowl. "Oatmeal," she said, putting in that one word everything she felt about the beach and wanting to go there.

"It's not that I don't want to do better for you," Ben said. He touched her arm with the tips of his fingers for just a moment. "I wish I could. And I wish I could have hung on to that corned beef hash last time, but it was heavy and I had to run and there was a fight on the train and I lost the sugar too. I wonder which bastard has it now."

"I know how hard you try, Ben. I do. It's just sometimes everything comes on you at once, especially when it's a Saturday like this. Having to get water way down the block and that, only when there's electricity to run the pump, and this oatmeal, sometimes it's just once too often, and then, most of all, you commuting in all that danger to get food."

"I make out. I'm not the smallest one on that train."

"God, I think that everyday. Thank God, I say to myself, or where would we be now. Dead of starvation that's where."

She watched him leaning low over his bowl, pushing his lips out and making a sucking sound. Even now she was still surprised to see how long and naked his skull arched, and she had an impulse, seeing it there so bare and ugly and thinking of the commuting, to cover it gently with her two hands, to cup it and make her hands do for his hair; but she only smoothed at her kerchief again to make sure it covered her own baldness.

"Is it living, though? Is it living, staying home all the time, hiding like, in this house? Maybe it's the rest of them, the dead ones, that are lucky. It's pretty sad when a person can't even go to the beach on a Saturday."

She was thinking the one thing she didn't want to do most of all was to hurt him. No, she told herself inside, sternly. Stop it right now. Be silent for once and eat, and, like Ben says, don't think; but she was caught up in it somehow and she said, "You know, Littleboy never did go to the beach yet, not even once, and it's only nine miles down," and she knew it would hurt him.

"Where is Littleboy," he said and yelled again out the window. "He just roams."

"It isn't as if there were cars to worry about anymore, and have you seen how fast he is and how he climbs so good for three and a

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half? Besides, what can you do when he gets up so early."

He was finished eating now and he got up and dipped a cup of water from the large pan on the stove and drank it. "I'll take a look," he said. "He won't come when you call."

She began to eat finally, watching him out the kitchen window and listening to him calling. Seeing him hunched forward and squinting because he had worn glasses before and his last pair had been broken a year ago. Not in a fight, because he was careful not to wear them commuting even then, when it wasn't quite so bad. It was Littleboy that had done it, climbed up and got them himself from the very top drawer, and he was a whole year younger. Next thing she knew they were on the floor, broken.

Ben disappeared out of range of the window and Littleboy came darting in as though he had been huddling by the door behind the arbor vitae all the time.

He was the opposite of his big, pink and hairless parents, with thick and fine black hair growing low over his forehead and extending down the back of his neck so far that she always wondered if it ended where hair used to end, before, or whether it grew too far down. He was thin and small for his age, but strong-looking and wiry with long arms and legs. He had a pale, olive skin, wide, blunt features and a wary stare, and he looked at her now, waiting to see what she would do.

She only sighed, lifted him and put him in his youth chair and kissed his firm, warm cheek, thinking, what beautiful hair, and wishing she knew how to cut it better so he would look neat.

"We don't have any more sugar," she said, "but I saved you some raisins," and she took down a box and sprinkled some on his cereal.

Then she went to the door and called, "He's here, Ben. He's here." And in a softer voice she said, "The pixy." She heard Ben answer with a whistle and she turned back to the kitchen to find Littleboy's oatmeal on the floor in a lopsided oval lump, and him, still looking at her with wise and wary brown eyes.

She knelt down first, and spooned most of it back into the bowl. Then she picked him up rather roughly, but there was gentleness to the roughness, too. She pulled at the elastic topped jeans and gave him two hard, satisfying slaps on bare buttocks. "It isn't as if we had food to waste," she said, noticing the down that grew along his backbone and wondering if that was the way the three year olds had been before.

He made an *Aaa, Aaa,* sound, but didn't cry, and after that she picked him up and held him so that he nuzzled into her neck in

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the way she liked. "Aaa," he said again, more softly, and bit her just above the collar bone.

She dropped him down, letting him kind of slide with her arms still around him. It hurt and she could see there was a shallow, half inch piece bitten right out.

"He bit me again," she shouted, hearing Ben at the door. "He bit me. A real piece out even, and look, he has it in his mouth still."

"God, what a . . ."

"Don't hurt him. I already slapped him good for the floor and three is a hard age." She pulled at Ben's arm. "It says so in the books. Three *is* hard, it says." But she remembered it really said that three was a beginning to be cooperative age.

He let go and Littleboy ran out of the kitchen back toward the bedrooms.

She took a deep breath. "I've just got to get out of this house. I mean really away."

She sat down and let him wash the place and cross two bandaids over it. "Do you think we could go? Do you think we could go just one more time with a blanket and a picnic lunch? I've just got to do *something*."

"All right. All right. You wear the wrench in your belt and I'll wear the hammer, and we'll risk taking the car."

She spent twenty minutes looking for bathing suits and not finding them, and then she stopped because she knew it didn't really matter, there probably wouldn't be anyone there.

The picnic was simple enough. She gathered it together in five minutes, a precious can of tuna fish and hard, homemade biscuits baked the evening before when the electricity had come on for a while, and shriveled, worm-eaten apples, picked from neighboring trees and hoarded all winter in another house that had a cellar.

She heard Ben banging about in the garage, measuring out gas from his cache of cans, ten-miles worth to put in the car and ten-miles worth in a can to carry along and hide someplace for the trip back.

Now that he had decided they would go, her mind began to be full of what ifs. Still, she thought, she would *not* change her mind. Surely once in four years was not too often to risk going to the beach. She had thought about it all last year too, and now she was going and she would enjoy it.

She gave Littleboy an apple to keep him busy and she packed the lunch in the basket, all the time pressing her lips tight together, and she said to herself that she was *not* going to think of anymore what-ifs, and she *was* going to have a good time.

Ben had switched after the war from the big-finned Dodge to a small and rattly European car.

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They fit into it cozily, the lunch in back with the army blanket and a pail and shovel for playing in the sand, and Littleboy in front on her lap, his hair brushing her cheek as he turned, looking out.

They started out on the empty road. "Remember how it was before on a weekend?" she said, and laughed. "Bumper to bumper, they called it. We didn't like it then."

A little way down they passed an old person on a bicycle, in jeans and a bright shirt with the tail out. They couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman, but the person smiled and they waved and called "Aaa."

The sun was hot, but as they neared the beach there began to be a breeze and she could smell the sea. She began to feel as she had the very first time she had seen it. She had been born in Ohio and she was twelve before she had taken a trip and come out on the wide, flat, sunny sands and smelled this smell.

She held Littleboy tight though it made him squirm, and she leaned against Ben's shoulder. "Oh, it's going to be fun!" she said. "Littleboy, you're going to see the sea. Look darling, keep watching, and smell. It's delicious." And Littleboy squirmed until she let go again.

Then, at last, there was the sea, and it *was* exactly as it had always been, huge and sparkling and making a sound like . . . no, *drowning out* the noises of wars. Like the black sky with stars, or the cold and stolid moon, it dwarfed even what had happened.

They passed the long, brick bathhouses, looking about as they always had, but the boardwalks between were gone, as Ben had said, not a stick left of them.

"Let's stop at the main bathhouse."

"No," Ben said. "We better keep away from those places. You can't tell who's in there. I'm going way down beyond."

She was glad, really, especially because at the last bathhouse she thought she saw a dark figure duck behind the wall.

They went down another mile or so, then drove the car off behind some stunted trees and bushes.

"Nothing's going to spoil this Saturday," she said, pulling out the picnic things, "just nothing. Come, Littleboy." She kicked off her shoes and started running for the beach, the basket bouncing against her knee.

Littleboy slipped out of his roomy sneakers easily and scampered after her. "You can take your clothes off," she told him. "There's nobody here at all."

When Ben came, later, after hiding the gas, she was settled, flat on the blanket in old red shorts and a halter, and still the

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same green kerchief, and Littleboy, brown and naked, splashed with his pail in the shallow water, the wetness bringing out the hairs along his back.

"Look," she said, "nobody as far as you can see and you can see so far. It gives you a different feeling from home. You know there are people here and there in the houses, but here, it's like we were the only ones, and here it doesn't even matter. Like Adam and Eve, we are, just you and me and our baby."

He lay on his stomach next to her. "Nice breeze," he said.

Shoulder to shoulder they watched the waves and the gulls and Littleboy, and later they splashed in the surf and then ate the lunch and lay watching again, lazy, on their stomachs. And after a while she turned on her back to see his face. "With the sea it doesn't matter at all," she said and she put her arm across his shoulder. "And we're just part of everything, the wind and the earth and the sea too, my Adam."

"Eve," he said and smiled and kissed her and it was a longer kiss than they had meant. "Myra. Myra."

"There's nobody but us."

She sat up. "I don't even know a doctor since Press Smith was killed by those robbing kids and I'd be scared."

"We'll find one. Besides, you didn't have any trouble. It's been so damn long." She pulled away from his arm. "And I love you. And Littleboy, he'll be way over four by the time we'd have another one."

She stood up and stretched and then looked down the beach and Ben put a hand around her ankle. She looked down the other way. "Somebody's coming," she said, and then he got up too.

Far down, walking in a business-like way on the hard, damp part of the sand, three men were coming toward them.

"You got your wrench?" Ben asked. "Put it just under the blanket and sit down by it, but keep your knees under you."

He put his tee shirt back on, leaving it hanging out, and he hooked the hammer under his belt in back, the top covered by the shirt. Then he stood and waited for them to come.

They were all three bald and shirtless. Two wore jeans cut off at the knees and thick belts, and the other had checked shorts and a red leather cap and a pistol stuck in his belt in the middle of the front, at the buckle. He was older. The others looked like kids and they held back as they neared and let the older one come up alone. He was a small man, but looked tough. "You got gas," he said, a flat-voiced statement of fact.

"Just enough to get home."

"I don't mean right here. You

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got gas at home is what I mean."

Myra sat stiffly, her hand on the blanket on top of where the wrench was. Ben was a little in front of her and she could see his curving, forward-sloping shoulders and the lump of the hammer-head at the small of his back. If he stood up straight, she thought, and held his shoulders like they ought to be, he would look broad and even taller and he would show that little man, but the other had the pistol. Her eyes kept coming back to its shining black.

Ben took a step forward. "Don't move," the little man said. He shifted his weight to one leg, looking relaxed, and put his hand on his hip near the pistol. "Where you got the gas to get you home? Maybe we'll come with you and you might lend us a little of that gas you got there at your house. Where'd you hide the stuff to get you back, or I'll let my boys play a bit with your little one and you might not like it."

Littleboy, she saw, had edged down, away from them, and he crouched now, watching with his wide-eyed stare. She could see the tense, stringy muscles along his arms and legs and he reminded her of gibbons she had seen at the zoo long ago. His poor little face looks old, she thought, too old for three years. Her fingers closed over the blanket-covered wrench. They'd better not hurt Littleboy.

She heard her husband say, "I don't know." "Oh Ben," she said, "oh Ben."

The man made a motion and the two youths started out, but Littleboy had started first, she saw. She pulled at her wrench and then had to stop and fumble with the blanket, and it took a long time because she kept her eyes on Littleboy and the two others chasing.

She heard a shout and a grunt beside her. "Oh Ben," she said again, and turned, but it was Ben on top attacking the other, and the small man was trying to use his pistol as a club but he had hold of the wrong end for that, and Ben had the hammer and he was much bigger.

He was finished in a minute. She watched, empty-eyed, the whole of it, holding the wrench in a white-knuckled hand in case he needed her.

Afterward, he moved from the body into a crouching run, hammer in one hand and pistol, by the barrel, in the other. "You stay here," he shouted back.

She looked at the sea a few minutes, and listened to it, but her own feelings seemed more important than the stoic sea now. She turned and followed, walking along the marks where the feet had swept at the soft sand.

Where the bushes began she saw him loping back. "What happened?"

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"They ran off when they saw me after them with the other guy's gun. No bullets though. You'll have to help look now."

"He's lost!"

"He won't come when you call. We'll just have to look. He could be way out. I'll try that and you stay close and look here. The gas is buried under that bush there, if you need it."

"We've got to find him, Ben. He doesn't know his way home from here."

He came to her and kissed her and held her firmly across the shoulders with one arm. She could feel his muscles bunch into her neck as hard almost as the head of his hammer that pressed against her arm. She remembered a time four years ago when his embrace had been soft and comfortable. He had had hair then, but he had been quite fat, and now he was hard and bald, having gained something and lost something.

He turned and started off, but looked back and she smiled and nodded to show him she felt better from his arm around her and the kiss.

I would die if anything happened and we would lose Littleboy, she thought, but mostly I would hate to lose Ben. Then the world would really be lost altogether, and everything would be ended.

She looked, calling in a whisper, knowing she had to peer under each bush and watch behind and ahead for scampering things. He's so small when he huddles into a ball and he can sit so still. Sometimes I wish there was another three year old around to judge him by. I forget so much about how it used to be, before. Sometimes I just wonder about him.

"Littleboy, Littleboy. Mommy wants you," she called softly. "Come. There's still time to play in the sand and there are apples left." she leaned forward, and her hand reached to touch the bushes.

Later the breeze began to cool and a few clouds gathered. She shivered in just her shorts and halter, but it was mostly an inner coldness. She felt she had circled, hunting, for well over an hour, but she had no watch, and at a time like this she wasn't sure of her judgment. Still, the sun seemed low. They should go home soon. She kept watching now, too, for silhouettes of people who might *not* be Ben or Littleboy, and she probed the bushes with her wrench with less care. Every now and then she went back to look at the blanket and the basket and the pail and shovel, lying alone and far from the water, and the body there, with the red leather cap beside it.

And then, when she came back another time to see if all the things were still there, undisturbed, she saw a tall, two-headed seeming monster walking briskly

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down the beach, and one head, bouncing directly over the other one, had hair and was Littleboy's.

The sunset was just beginning. The rosy glow deepened as they neared her and changed the colors of everything. The red plaid of Ben's shorts seemed more emphatic. The sand turned orangish. She ran to meet them, laughing and splashing her feet in the shallow water, and she came up and held Ben tight around the waist and Littleboy said, "Aaa."

"We'll be home before dark," she said. "There's even time for one last splash."

They packed up finally while Littleboy circled the body by the blanket, touching it sometimes until Ben slapped him for it and he went off and sat down and made little cat sounds to himself.

He fell asleep in her lap on the way home, lying forward against her with his head at her neck the way she liked. The sunset was deep, with reds and purples.

She leaned against Ben. "The beach always makes you tired," she said. "I remember that from before too. I'll be able to sleep tonight."

They drove silently along the wide empty parkway. The car had no lights, but that didn't matter.

"We did have a good day after all," she said. "I feel renewed."

"Good," he said.

It was just dark as they drove up to the house. Ben stopped the car and they sat a moment and held hands before moving to get the things out.

"We had a good day," she said again. "And Littleboy saw the sea." She put her hand on the sleeping boy's hair, gently so as not to disturb him and then she yawned. "I wonder if it really *was* Saturday."

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*Marcel Aymé, the witty, ironic author of such books as* THE GREEN MARE *and* THE SECRET STREAM, *here convincingly demonstrates again why he has been called the French counterpart of John Collier and Roald Dahl.*

# The Walker-Through-Walls

## by Marcel Aymé

*(translated by Norman Denny)*

THERE LIVED IN MONTMARTRE, ON the third floor of No. *75bis,* Rue d'Orchampt, an excellent man named Dutilleul who possessed the singular gift of being able to walk through walls without experiencing any discomfort. He wore *pince-nez* and a little black beard, and he was a third grade clerk in the Ministry of Registration. In winter he went by bus to his office, and in summer he went on foot, under his bowler-hat.

Dutilleul had just entered his forty-third year when his especial aptitude was revealed to him. One evening, having been caught by a brief failure of the electricity in the vestibule of his small bachelor apartment, he fumbled for a moment in the darkness, and when the lights went on again found himself on the third-floor landing. Since his front door was locked on the inside the incident caused him to reflect, and despite the protests of his reason he resolved to go in as he had come out, by walking through the wall. This strange attainment, which seemed to correspond to none of his aspirations, preyed slightly on his mind, and on the following day, Saturday, he took advantage of the weekend to call on a neighbouring doctor and put the case to him. The doctor, after convincing himself of the truth of his story, discovered upon examination that the cause of the trouble lay in the helicoidal hardening of the strangulatory wall of the thyroid vesicle. He prescribed a regime of intensive exertion, and, at the rate of two cachets a year, the absorption into the system of tetravalent reintegration powder, a mixture

*From the book* ACROSS PARIS AND OTHER STORIES *by Marcel Aymé; © 1943 by Librarie Gallimard; published by Harper & Brothers*



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of rice flour and centaur's hormones.

After taking the first cachet Dutilleul put the rest away in a drawer and thought no more about them. As for the intensive exertion, his work as a civil servant was ordered by custom which did not permit of any excess; neither did his leisure hours, which were devoted to the daily paper and his stamp collection, call for any unreasonable expenditure of energy. So that at the end of a year his knack of walking through walls remained unimpaired; but he never made use of it, except inadvertently, having little love of adventure and being non-receptive to the lures of the imagination. It did not even occur to him to enter his own apartment otherwise than by the door, after duly turning the key in the lock. Perhaps he would have grown old in his sedate habits, without ever being tempted to put his gift to the test, had not an extraordinary event suddenly occurred to revolutionise his existence. M. Mouron, the head of his sub-section at the ministry, was transferred to other duties and replaced by a M. Lécuyer, who was brisk of speech and wore a small military moustache. From the first day this newcomer manifested the liveliest disapproval of the *pince-nez* which Dutilleul wore attached to a short chain, and of his little black beard, and he elected to treat him as a tiresome and not over-clean elderly encumbrance. Worst of all, he saw fit to introduce into the work of his sub-section certain far-reaching reforms which were well calculated to trouble the peace of mind of his subordinate. Dutilleul was accustomed to begin his letters with the following formula: 'With reference to your esteemed communication of the such-and-such instant, and having regard to our previous exchange of letters on this subject, I have the honour to inform you . . .' For which M. Lécuyer proposed to substitute a more trans-Atlantic form of words 'Yours of the such-and-such. I beg to state . . .' Dutilleul could not accustom himself to this epistolary terseness. Despite himself he reverted with a machine-like obstinacy to the traditional form, thereby incurring the increasing animosity of his superior. The atmosphere of the Ministry of Registration became almost oppressive to him. He went apprehensively to work in the morning, and at night, after going to bed, he would often lie brooding for as much as a quarter of an hour before falling asleep.

Outraged by a reactionary stubborness which threatened to undermine the success of his reforms, M. Lécuyer relegated Dutilleul to a small and sombre room, scarcely more than a cupboard, next door to his own office. It was

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entered by a low, narrow door giving on to the corridor, and which bore in capital letters the legend: 'BACK FILES'. Dutilleul resignedly asquiesced in this unprecedented humiliation, but when he read some more than usually sanguinary story in his newspaper he found himself dreaming that M. Lécuyer was the victim.

One day his chief burst into his cupboard brandishing a letter and bellowing:

'This must be done again! I insist upon your rewriting this unspeakable document which is a disgrace to my subsection!'

Dutilleul was about to protest, but in a voice of thunder. M. Lécuyer informed him that he was a routine-besotted mole, and crumpling the letter flung it in his face. Dutilleul was a modest man, but proud. Left alone in his cupboard he felt his temperature rising, and suddenly he was seized with an inspiration. Leaving his seat he passed into the wall between his chief's room and his own, but he did so with caution, so that only his head emerged on the other side. M. Lécuyer, seated again at his desk, his pen still quivering, was in the act of striking out a comma from the text of a letter submitted by a subordinate for his approval, when he heard the sound of a cough in his room. Looking up he perceived with unspeakable dismay the head of Dutilleul, seemingly affixed to the wall like a trophy of the chase. But this head was alive. Through the *pince-nez*, with their length of chain, the eyes glared balefully at him. What is more, the head spoke.

'Sir,' it said, 'you are a scoundrel, a blockhead and a mountebank.'

M. Lécuyer, his mouth gaping with horror, had difficulty in withdrawing his gaze from the apparition. At length he heaved himself out of his chair, plunged into the corridor and flung open the door of the cupboard. Dutilleul, pen in hand, was seated in his accustomed place, in an attitude of tranquil and devoted industry. M. Lécuyer stared at him for some time in silence, and then, after muttering a few words, returned to his office. Scarcely had he resumed his seat than the head again appeared on the wall.

'Sir, you are a scoundrel, a blockhead and a mountebank.'

In the course of that day alone the terrifying head manifested itself twenty-three times, and on the following days it appeared with a similar frequency. Having acquired a certain skill at the game, Dutilleul was no longer content merely to abuse his chief. He uttered obscure threats, for example proclaiming in a sepulchral voice punctuated with truly demoniac laughter:

'The werewolf is here, the end is near! (*laughter*). Flesh creeps

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and terror fills the air! (*laughter*).'

Hearing which, the unhappy sub-section chief grew yet more pale, yet more breathless, while the hairs stood rigid on his head and the sweat of anguish trickled down his spine. During the first day he lost a pound in weight. In the course of the ensuing week, besides almost visibly melting away, he developed a tendency to eat soup with a fork and to greet the guardians of the law with a military salute. At the beginning of the second week an ambulance called at his dwelling and bore him off to a mental home.

Being thus delivered from the tyranny of M. Lécuyer, Dutilleul could return to his cherished formula—'With reference to your esteemed communication of the such-and-such . . .' Yet he was not satisfied. There was now a yearning in him, a new, imperious impulse which was nothing less than the need to walk through walls. It is true that he had ample opportunities of doing so, in his apartment for example, of which he did not neglect to avail himself. But the man possessing brilliant gifts cannot long be content to squander them on trifles. Moreover, the act of walking through a wall cannot be said to constitute an end in itself. It is a mere beginning, the start of an adventure calling for an outcome, a realisation—calling, in short, for a reward. Dutilleul was well aware of this. He felt an inner need to expand, a growing desire to fulfil and surpass himself, and a restless hankering which was in some sort the call of the other side of the wall. But an objective, alas, was lacking. He sought inspiration in his daily paper, particularly in the columns devoted to politics and sport, both of which seemed to him commendable activities; but perceiving finally that these offered no outlet for persons capable of walking through walls, he fell back on the crime columns, which proved to be rich in suggestion.

Dutilleul's first burglary took place in a large credit establishment on the right bank of the Seine. After passing through a dozen walls and partitions he thrust his hand into a number of strong-boxes, filled his pockets with banknotes and before leaving signed his crime in red chalk, using the pseudonym of 'The Werewolf', adorned with a handsome flourish which was reproduced in all the papers next day. By the end of a week 'The Werewolf' had achieved an extraordinary celebrity. The heart of the public went out unreservedly to this phenomenal burglar who so prettily mocked the police. He drew attention to himself each night by a fresh exploit carried out at the expense, now of a bank, now of a jeweller's shop or of some wealthy individual. In Paris, as in the provinces, there was no woman with

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romance in her heart who had not a fervent desire to belong body and soul to the terrible Werewolf. After the theft of the famous Burdigala diamond and the robbing of the Crédit Municipal, which occurred during the same week, the enthusiasm of the crowd reached the point of delirium. The Minister of the Interior was compelled to resign, dragging with him in his fall the Minister of Registration. Nevertheless, Dutilleul, now one of the richest men in Paris, never failed to arrive punctually at the office, and was spoken of as a candidate for the *palmes académiques*. And every morning, at the Ministry of Registration, he had the pleasure of hearing his colleagues discuss his exploits of the previous night. 'This Werewolf,' they said, 'is a stupendous fellow, a superman, a genius.' Hearing such praise, Dutilleul turned pink with embarrassment and behind the *pince-nez* his eyes shone with friendship and gratitude. A day came when the atmosphere of sympathy so overwhelmed him that he felt he could keep the secret no longer. Surveying with a last twinge of shyness the group of his colleagues arrayed round a newspaper containing an account of the robbery of the Banque de France, he said in a diffident voice: 'As a matter of fact, *I'm* the Werewolf.' The confession was received with a huge and interminable burst of laughter, and the nickname of 'Werewolf' was at once mockingly bestowed on him. That evening, at the time of leaving the ministry, he was the object of endless pleasantries on the part of his fellow-workers, and life seemed to him less rosy.

A few days later the Werewolf allowed himself to be caught by a police patrol in a jeweller's shop on the Rue de la Paix. He had inscribed his signature on the safe and was singing a drinking-song while smashing windows with a massive gold tankard. It would have been a simple matter for him to escape by merely slipping through a wall, but everything leads one to suppose that he wished to be arrested, probably for the sole purpose of confounding the colleagues whose incredulity had so mortified him. These were indeed greatly astonished when the newspapers next day published Dutilleul's picture on the front page. They bitterly regretted having underrated their inspired *confrère*, and did him homage by growing little beards. Some of them, carried away by remorse and admiration, went so far as to try to get their hands on the wallets or watches of their friends and relations.

It may well be considered that to allow oneself to be caught by the police in order to impress a few colleagues is to display an extreme frivolity unworthy of an

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eminent public figure; but the apparent exercise of free-will plays little part in a resolution of this kind. In sacrificing his liberty Dutilleul thought he was yielding to an arrogant desire for revenge, whereas in fact he was merely following the ineluctable course of his destiny. No man who walks through walls can consider his career even moderately fulfilled if he has not had at least one taste of prison. When Dutilleul entered the precincts of the Santé he had a feeling of being the spoilt child of fortune. The thickness of the walls was to him a positive delight. On the very day following his incarceration the warders discovered to their stupefaction that he had driven a nail into the wall of his cell and had hung from it a gold watch belonging to the prison Governor. He either could not or would not disclose how the article had come into his possession. The watch was restored to its owner and the next day was again found at the bedside of the Werewolf, together with the first volume of *The Three Musketeers*, borrowed from the Governor's library. The whole staff of the prison was on edge. The warders complained, moreover, of receiving kicks on the bottom coming from some inexplicable source. It seemed that the walls no longer had ears but had feet instead. The detention of the Werewolf had lasted a week when the Governor, entering his office one morning, found the following letter on his desk:

'SIR:

With reference to our interview of the 17th instant, and having regard to your general instruction of May 15th of last year, I have the honour to inform you that I have just concluded my perusal of *The Three Musketeers*, Vol. II, and that I propose to escape tonight between 11.25 p.m. and 11.35 p.m.

I beg to remain, Sir,

With expressions of the deepest respect,

Your obedient servant,

THE WEREWOLF.'

Despite the extremely close watch kept upon him that night, Dutilleul escaped at 11.30. The news, when it became known to the public on the following day, occasioned an outburst of tremendous enthusiasm. Nevertheless, Dutilleul, having achieved another burglary which set the seal on his popularity, seemed to have little desire to hide himself and walked freely about Montmartre without taking any precautions. Three days after his escape he was arrested in the Café due Rêve on the Rue Clignancourt, where he was drinking a *vin blanc citron* with a few friends.

Being taken back to the Santé and secured behind triple locks in a gloomy dungeon, the Werewolf left it the same evening and

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passed the night in the guest-room of the Governor's apartment. At about nine the next morning he rang for his *petit déjeuner* and allowed himself to be captured in bed, without offering any resistance, by the warders summoned for the purpose. The outraged Governor caused a special guard to be posted at the door of his cell and put him on bread and water. Towards midday he went out and had lunch at a neighbouring restaurant and, having finished his coffee, telephoned the Governor as follows:

'My dear Governor, I am covered with confusion. When I left the prison a short time ago I omitted to take your wallet, so that I am now penniless in a restaurant. Will you be so good as to send someone to pay my bill?'

The Governor hurried to the spot in person, and so far forgot himself as to utter threats and abuse. Wounded in his deepest feelings, Dutilleul escaped the following night, never to return. This time he took the precaution of shaving his black tuft of beard and substituting hornrimmed spectacles for the *pince-nez* and chain. A sports cap and a suit of plus-fours in a loud check completed his transformation. He established himself in a small apartment in the Avenue Junot where, during the period preceding his first arrest, he had installed a part of his furniture and the possessions which he most valued. The notoriety attaching to his name was beginning to weary him, and since his stay in the Santé he had become rather blasé in the matter of walking through walls. The thickest, the proudest of them seemed to him no more than the flimsiest of screens, and he dreamed of thrusting his way into the very heart of some massive pyramid. While meditating on the project of a trip to Egypt he lived the most tranquil of lives, divided between his stamp collection, the cinema and prolonged strolls about Montmartre. So complete was his metamorphosis that, clean-shaven and hornrimmed-spectacled, he passed his best friends in the street without being recognised. Only the painter, Gen Paul, whom no detail escaped of any change in the physiognomy of an old resident of the quarter, succeeded in the end in penetrating his disguise. Finding himself face to face with Dutilleul at the corner of the Rue de l'Abreuvoir, he could not restrain himself from remarking in his crude slang:

*'Dis donc, je vois que tu t'es miché en gigolpince pour tétarer ceux de la sûrepige'*—which roughly means, in common speech: 'I see you've got yourself up like a man of fashion to baffle the inspectors of the Sûreté.'

'Ah!' murmured Dutilleul. 'So you've recognised me!'

He was perturbed by this and

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resolved to hasten his departure for Egypt. But it was on the afternoon of this very day that he fell in love with a ravishing blonde whom he twice encountered in the Rue Lepic, at a quarter of an hour's interval. He instantly forgot his stamp collection, Egypt and the Pyramids. The blonde, for her part, had gazed at him with considerable interest. Nothing stirs the imagination of the young women of the present day more than plus-fours and horn-rimmed spectacles: they have a flavour of film scripts, they set one dreaming of cocktails and Californian nights. Unfortunately the lady—so Dutilleul was informed by Gen Paul—was married to a violent and jealous man. This suspicious husband, who himself led a dissolute life, regularly forsook his wife between the hours of ten at night and four in the morning; but before doing so he locked her in her bedroom and padlocked all the shutters. During the daytime he kept a close eye on her, even going so far on occasions as to follow her as she went along the streets of Montmartre.

'Always snooping, you see. He's one of those coarse-minded so-and-so's that don't stand for anyone poaching on their preserves.'

But Gen Paul's warning served only to inflame Dutilleul's ardour. Encountering the young woman in the Rue Tholozé on the following day, he boldly followed her into a *crémerie*, and while she was waiting her turn to be served he told her of his respectful passion and that he knew all—the villainous husband, the locked door and the padlocked shutters—but that he proposed nevertheless to visit her that same evening. The blonde flushed scarlet while the milk-jug trembled in her hand. Her eyes melting with tenderness she murmured weakly: 'Alas, Monsieur, it is impossible.'

On the evening of that glorious day, towards ten o'clock, Dutilleul was at his post in the Rue Norvins, keeping watch on a solid outer wall behind which was situated a small house of which he could see nothing except the weather-cock and the chimney-stack. A door in this wall opened and a man emerged who, after locking it carefully behind him, went down the hill towards the Avenue Junot. Dutilleul waited until he saw him vanish in the far distance at the turn in the road, after which he counted ten. Then he darted forward, skipped lightly with an athlete's stride into the wall, and running through all obstacles penetrated into the bedroom of the beautiful captive. She received him with transports of delight and they made love till an advanced hour.

The next day Dutilleul had the vexation to suffer from a severe headache. It was a matter of no importance, and he had no inten-

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tion of failing to keep his rendezvous for so little. However, chancing to discover a few cachets scattered at the bottom of a drawer he swallowed one in the morning and another in the afternoon. By the evening his headache was bearable, and his state of exaltation caused him to forget it. The young woman was awaiting him with all the impatience to which her recollections of the previous evening had given rise, and that night they made love until three in the morning. Upon his departure, as he passed through the inner and outer walls of the house, Dutilleul had a sense of unaccustomed friction at his hips and shoulders. However, he did not think this worthy of any particular attention. Only when he came to penetrate the surrounding wall did he become definitely aware of a feeling of resistance. He seemed to be moving in a substance that was still fluid, but which was thickening so that it seemed to gain in consistency with every movement that he made. Having succeeded in thrusting the whole of his body into the thickness of the wall, he found that he could no longer progress, and in terror he recalled the two cachets he had taken during the day. These cachets, which he had mistaken for aspirin, had in reality contained the tetravalent reintegration powder prescribed by the doctor a year before. The medicine, aided by his intensive exertions, was suddenly having its intended effect.

Dutilleul was, as it were, petrified in the interior of the wall. He is there to this day, incorporated in the stone. Nightbirds descending the Rue Norvins at the hour when the clamour of Paris has died down, may sometimes hear a stifled voice seeming to come from beyond the tomb, which they take to be the moaning of the wind as it whistles at the crossroads of the Butte. It is Werewolf Dutilleul mourning for his glorious career and his too-brief love. Occasionally on a winter's night the painter, Gen Paul, taking down his guitar, ventures forth into the echoing solitude of the Rue Norvins to console the unhappy prisoner with a song; and the notes, flying from his benumbed fingers, pierce to the heart of the stone like drops of moonlight.

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*Keith Denison, on a routine Time Patrol mission to Iran in in 558 B.C., failed to return on schedule. That, of course, meant he would never return—unless Manse Everard also went back to the time of the great Cyrus and performed a rather more successful miracle than the fabled one of Croesus.*

# BRAVE TO BE A KING

*by Poul Anderson*

## I

ON AN EVENING IN MID-TWENTIETH Century New York, Manse Everard had changed into a disreputable lounging outfit and was mixing himself a drink. The doorbell interrupted. He swore at it. A tiring few days lay behind him and he wanted no other company than the lost narratives of Dr. Watson.

Well, maybe this character could be gotten rid of. He slippered across his apartment and opened the door: a big man, gray-eyed and brown-haired, with a battered face now mutinous. "Hello," he said coldly.

And then, all at once, it was as if he were aboard some early spaceship which had just entered free fall; he stood weightless and helpless in a blaze of stars.

"Oh," he said. ". . . Come in."

Cynthia Denison poised a moment, looking past him to the bar. He had hung two crossed spears and a horse-plumed helmet from the Achaean Bronze Age over it. They were dark and shining and inhumanly beautiful. She tried to speak with steadiness, but failed. "Could I have a drink, Manse? Right away?"

"Of course." He clamped his mouth shut and helped her off with her coat. She closed the door and sat down on a Swedish Modern couch as clean and functional as the Homeric weapons. Her hands fumbled with her purse, getting out cigarets. For a time she did not look at him, nor he at her.

"Do you still drink Irish on the rocks?" he asked. His words seemed to come from far away, and his body was awkward among



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bottles and glasses, forgetting how the Time Patrol had trained it.

"Yes," she said. "So you do remember." Her lighter snapped, unexpectedly loud in the room.

"It's been just a few months," he said, for lack of other phrases.

"Entropic time. Regular untampered-with twenty-four-hours-to-the-day time." She blew a cloud of smoke and stared at it. "Not much more than that for me. I've been in now almost continously since my, my wedding. just eight and a half months of my personal, biological, lifeline time since Keith and I—but how long has it been for you, Manse? How many years have you rung up, in how many different epochs, since you were Keith's best man?"

She had always had a rather high and thin voice. It was the only flaw he had ever found in her, unless you counted her being so small, barely five feet. So she could never put much expression into her tones. But he could hear that she was staving off a scream.

He gave her a drink. "Down the hatch," he said. "All of it." She obeyed, strangling a little. He got her a refill and completed his own Scotch and soda. Then he drew up a chair and took pipe and tobacco from the depths of his motheaten smoking jacket. His hands still shook, but so faintly he didn't think she would notice. It had been wise of her, not to blurt whatever news she carried; they both needed a chance to get back their control.

Now he even dared to look straight at her. She hadn't changed. Her figure was almost perfect in a delicate way, as the black dress emphasized. Sunlight-colored hair fell to her shoulders; the eyes were blue and enormous, under arched brows, in a tip-tilted face whose lips were always just a little parted. She hadn't enough makeup for him to tell for sure if she had cried lately. But she looked very near to it.

Everard became busy filling his pipe. "Okay, Cyn," he said. "Want to tell me?"

She shivered. Finally she got out: "Keith. He's disappeared."

"Huh?" Everard sat up straight. "On a mission?"

"Yes. Where else? Ancient Iran. He went back there and never returned. That was a week ago." She set her glass down on the couch arm and twisted her fingers together. "The Patrol searched, of course. I just heard the results today. They can't find him. They can't even find out what happened to him."

"Judas," whispered Everard.

"Keith always . . . always thought of you as his best friend," she said frantically. "You wouldn't believe how often he spoke of you. Honestly, Manse, I know we've neglected you, but you never seemed to be in and—"

"Of course," he said. "How

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childish do you think I am? I was busy. And after all, you two were newly married."

*After I introduced you, that night beneath Mauna Loa and the moon. The Time Patrol doesn't bother with snobbishness. A youngster like Cynthia Cunningham, a mere clerk fresh out of the Academy and Attached to her own century, is quite free to see a ranking veteran . . . like myself, for instance . . . as often as they both wish off duty. There is no reason why he should not use his skill at disguise to take her waltzing in Strauss' Vienna or to the theater in Shakespeare's London —as well as exploring funny little bars in Tom Lehrer's New York or playing tag in the sun and surf of Hawaii a thousand years before the canoe men arrived.—And a fellow member of the Patrol is equally free to join them both. And later to marry her. Sure.*

Everard got his pipe going. When his face was screened with smoke, he said: "Begin at the beginning. I've been out of touch with you for—two or three years of my own lifeline times—so I'm not sure precisely what Keith was working on."

"That long?" she asked wonderingly. "You never even spent your furloughs in this decade? We did want you to come visit us."

"Quit apologizing!" he snapped. "I could have dropped in if I'd wished." The elfin face looked as if he had slapped it. He backed up, appalled. "I'm sorry. Naturally I wanted to. But as I said . . . we Unattached agents are so damned busy, hopping around in all space-time like fleas on a griddle. . . . Oh, hell," he tried to smile, "you know me, Cyn, tactless, but it doesn't mean anything. I originated a chimaera legend all by myself, back in Classic Greece. I was known as the *dilaiopod,* a curious monster with two left feet, both in its mouth."

She returned a dutiful quirk of lips and picked up her cigaret from the ashtray. "I'm still just a clerk in the front," she said. She meant the Engineering Studies Company, the Patrol's mask in this decade of American history. "But it puts me in close contact with all the other offices in this entire milieu, including headquarters. So I know exactly what's been done about Keith . . . and it isn't enough! They're just abandoning him! Manse, if you won't help him, Keith is dead!"

She stopped, shakily. To give them both a little more time, Everard reviewed the career of Keith Denison.

Born Cambridge, Mass., 1927, to a moderately wealthy family. Ph.D. in archeology with a distinguished thesis at the age of 23, after having also done such things as taking a collegiate boxing championship and crossing the Atlantic in a thirty-foot ketch.

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Drafted in 1950, served in Korea with a bravery which would have earned him some fame in a more popular war. Yet you had to know him quite a while before you learned any of this. He spoke, with a gift of dry humor, about impersonal things, until there was work to be done. Then, without needless fuss, he did it. *Sure,* thought Everard, *the best man got the girl. Keith could've made Unattached easily, if he'd cared to. But he had roots here that I didn't. More stable, I guess.*

Discharged and at loose ends in 1952, Denison was contacted by a Patrol agent and recruited. It was always a shock to learn that time travel would be invented in the far future and that the ages would be (were; had always been) filled with its traffic; that the Patrol existed not only to assist this commerce but to preserve history, for the past was as changeable as the future; that the ultimate chiefs of the Patrol dwelt a million years from now on some unimaginable height of evolution —Yes. But Denison had accepted the fact more readily than most. His mind was supple and, after all, he was an archeologist. Once trained, he found a happy coincidence of his own interests and the needs of the Patrol: he became a Specialist, East Indo-European Protohistory, and in many ways a more important man than Everard.

For the Unattached officer might rove up and down the time lanes, rescuing the distressed and arresting the lawbreaker and keeping the fabric of human destiny secure. But how could he tell what he was doing without a record? Ages before the first hieroglyphics there had been wars and wanderings, discoveries and achievements, whose consequences reached through all the continuum. The Patrol had to know them. Charting their course was a job for the Specialist ratings.

*Besides all of which, Keith was a friend of mine.*

Everard took the pipe from his mouth. "Okay, Cynthia," he said. "Now tell me what did happen."

II

The little voice was almost dry now, so rigidly had she harnessed herself. "He was tracing the migrations of the different Aryan clans. They're very obscure, you know. You have to start at a point when the history is known for certain, and work backward. So on this last job, Keith was going to Iran in the year 558 B.C. That was near the close of the Median period, he said. He'd make inquiries among the people, learn their own traditions, and then afterward check back at a still earlier point, and so on— But you must know all about this, Manse. You

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helped him once, before we met. He often spoke about that."

"Oh, I just went along in case of trouble," Everard said. "He was studying the prehistoric trek of a certain band from the Don over the Hindu Kush. We told their chief we were passing hunters, claimed hospitality, and accompanied the wagon train for a few weeks. It was fun."

He remembered steppes and enormous skies, a windy gallop after antelope and a feast by campfires and a certain girl whose hair had held the bittersweet of woodsmoke. For a while he wished he could have lived and died as one of those tribesmen.

"Keith went back alone this time," continued Cynthia. "They're always so shorthanded in his branch, in the entire Patrol, I suppose. So many thousands of years to watch and so few man-lifetimes to do it with. He'd gone alone before. I was always afraid to let him, but he said . . . dressed as a wandering shepherd with nothing worth stealing . . . he'd be safer in the Iranian highlands than crossing Broadway. Only this time he wasn't!"

"I take it, then," said Everard quickly, "he left—a week ago, did you say?—intending to get his information, report it to the clearing house of his Specialty, and come back to the same day here as he'd left you." *Because only a blind buckethead would let more of your lifespan pass without being there himself.* "But he didn't."

"Yes." She lit another cigaret from the butt of the first. "I got worried right away. I asked the boss about it. He obliged me by querying himself a week ahead—today—and got the answer that Keith had not returned. The information-clearing house said he never came to them. So we checked with Records in milieu headquarters. Their answer was . . . was . . . Keith never did come back and no trace of him was ever found."

Everard nodded with great care. "Then, of course, the search was ordered which MHQ has a record of."

Mutable time made for a lot of paradoxes, he reflected for the thousandth occasion. You could annul a historical event, actually accomplish the old chestnut about killing your father in his cradle. But since you necessarily hopped back to a moment before the point of annulment, you were unaffected; so were your memories of what had "once" been. Now you-as-you-were would simply exist, without ever having had a casual antecedent. The conservation laws embody discontinuities which Twentieth Century physics does not suspect.

In the case of a missing man, you were not required to search for him just because a record somewhere said you had done so.

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But how else would you stand a chance of finding him? You *might* possibly go back and thereby change events so that you did find him after all—in which case the report you filed would **"always"** have recorded your success, and you alone would know the "former" truth.

It could get very messed up. No wonder the Patrol was fussy, even about small changes which would not affect the main pattern.

"Our office notified the boys in the Old Iranian milieu, who sent a party to investigate the spot," foretold Everard. "They knew only the approximate site at which Keith had intended to materialize, didn't they? I mean, since he couldn't know exactly where he'd be able to hide the scooter, he didn't file precise coordinates." Cynthia nodded. "But what I don't understand is, why didn't they find the machine afterward? Whatever happened to Keith, the scooter would still be somewhere around, in some cave or whatever. The Patrol has detectors. They should have been able to track down the scooter, at least, and then work backwards from it to locate Keith."

"They tried," she said. "But I'm told it's a wild, rugged country, hard to search. Nothing turned up. They couldn't find a trace. They might have, if they'd looked very, very hard—made a mile-by-mile, hour-by-hour search. But they didn't dare. You see, that particular milieu is critical. Mr. Gordon showed me the analysis. I couldn't follow all those symbols, but he said it was a very dangerous century to tamper with.

Everard closed one large hand on the bowl of his pipe. Its warmth was somehow comforting. Critical eras gave him the willies.

Most things you did in the past (including the post-Twentieth Century ages which were somebody else's past) had no measurable effect. Space-time was not easily distorted—it always tried to revert to its "original" configuration. Your blunders, or your deliberate criminal attempts at changing events, were largely ignored and soon forgotten. In fact, it usually turned out that the very things you did were part of your own world's history.

But now and again a nexus existed, so crucial that its alteration would change all the future.

"I see," said Everard. "They couldn't search as thoroughly as they wanted, because it might disturb too many of the local yokels, which might make them act differently when the big crisis came —Uh-huh. But how about making inquiries in disguise, among the people?"

"Several Patrol experts did. They tried that for weeks, Persian time. And the natives never even gave them a hint. Those tribes are so wild and suspicious . . . may-

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be they feared our agents were spies from the Median king—I understand they didn't like his rule. . . . No. The Patrol couldn't find a trace. And anyhow, there's no reason to think the pattern was affected. They believe Keith was murdered and his scooter vanished somehow. And what difference—" Cynthia sprang to her feet. Suddenly she yelled. "What difference does one more skeleton in one more gully make?"

Everard rose too; she came into his arms and he let her have it out. For himself, he had never thought it would be this bad. He had stopped remembering her, except maybe ten times a day, but now she came to him and the forgetting would have to be done all over again.

"Can't they go back locally?" she pleaded. "Can't somebody hop back a week from now, just to tell him not to go, is that so much to ask? What kind of monsters made that law against it?"

"Ordinary men did," said Everard. "If we once started doubling back to tinker with our personal pasts, we'd soon get so tangled up that none of us would exist."

"But in a million years or more —there must be exceptions."

Everard didn't answer. He knew that there were. He knew also that Keith Denison's case wouldn't be one of them. The Patrol was not staffed by saints, but its people dared not corrupt their own law for their own ends. You took your losses like any other corps, and raised a glass to the memory of your dead, and you did not travel back to look upon them again while they had lived.

Presently Cynthia left him, returned to her drink and tossed it down. The yellow locks swirled past her face as she did. "I'm sorry," she said. She got out a handkerchief and wiped her eyes. "I didn't mean to bawl."

"It's okay."

She stared at the floor. "You could try to help Keith. The regular agents have given up, but you could try."

It was a beggary from which he had no appeal. "I could," he told her. "I might not succeed. The existing records show that, if I tried, I failed. And any alteration of space-time is frowned on, even a trivial one like this."

"It isn't trivial to Keith," she said.

"You know, Cyn," he murmured, "you're one of the few women that ever lived who'd have phrased it so. Most would have said, 'It isn't trivial to me.' "

Her eyes looked into his . . . and she whispered:

"I'm sorry, Manse. I didn't realize. . . . I thought, what with all the time that's gone past for you, you would have—"

"What are you talking about?" he defended himself.

"Can't the Patrol psychs do any-

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thing for you?" she asked. Her head dropped again. "I mean, if they can condition us so we just simply can't tell anyone unauthorized that time travel exists . . . I should think it would also be possible to, to condition a person out of—"

"Skip it," said Everard roughly.

He gnawed his pipestem a while. "Okay," he said at last. "I've an idea or two of my own that may not have been tried. If Keith can be rescued in any way, you'll get him back before tomorrow noon."

"Could you time-hop me up to that moment, Manse?" She was beginning to tremble.

"I could," he said, "but I won't. One way or another, you'll need to be rested tomorrow. I'll take you home now and see that you swallow a sleepy pill. And then I'll come back here and think about the situation." He twisted his mouth into a sort of grin. "Cut out that shimmy, huh? I told you I had to think."

"Manse—" Her hands closed about his.

He knew a sudden hope for which he cursed himself.

III.

In the fall of the year 542 B.C., a solitary man came down out of the mountains and into the valley of the Kur. He rode a handsome chestnut gelding, bigger even than most cavalry horses, which might elsewhere have been an invitation to bandits; but the Great King had given so much law to his dominions that it was said a virgin with a sack of gold could walk unmolested across all Persia. It was one reason Manse Everard had chosen to hop to this date, sixteen years after Keith Denison's destination.

Another motive was to arrive long after any excitement which the time traveler had conceivably caused in 558 had died away. Whatever the truth about Keith's fate, it might be more approachable from the rear; particularly since straightforward methods had failed.

Finally, according to the Achaemenid Milieu office, autumn 542 happened to be the first season of relative tranquility since the disappearance. The years 558-553 had been tense ones when the Persian king of Anshan, Kuru-sh (he whom the future knew as Kaikhosru and Cyrus), was more and more at odds with his Median overlord Astyages. Then came three years while Cyrus revolted, civil war racked the empire, and the Persians finally overcame their northerly neighbors. But Cyrus was scarcely victorious before he must face counter-uprisings, as well as Turanian incursions; he spent four years putting down that trouble and extending his rule eastward. This alarmed his fellow monarchs: Babylon, Egypt, Lydia,

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and Sparta formed a coalition to destroy him, with King Croesus of Lydia leading an invasion in 546. The Lydians were broken and annexed; they revolted and had to be broken all over again; the troublesome Greek colonies of Ionia, Caria, and Lycia must be settled with—and while his generals did all this in the west, Cyrus himself must war in the east, forcing back the savage horsemen who would otherwise burn his cities.

Now there was a breathing spell. Cilicia would yield without a fight, seeing that Persia's other conquests were governed with a humanity and a tolerance of local custom such as the world had not known before. Cyrus would leave the eastern marches to his nobles, and devote himself to consolidating what he had won. Not until 539 would the war with Babylon be taken up again and Mesopotamia acquired. And then Cyrus would have another time of peace, until the wild men grew too strong beyond the Aral Sea and the King rode forth against them to his death.

Manse Everard entered Pasargadae as if into a springtime of hope.

Not that any actual era lends itself to such flowery metaphors. He jogged through miles where peasants bent with sickles, and dust smoked off the stubble fields into his eyes. Ragged children sucked their thumbs outside windowless mud huts and stared at him. A squad of lancers trotting by were costumed picturesquely enough, baggy pants and scaly armor, spiked or plumed helmets, gaily striped cloaks; but they were also dusty, sweaty, and swapping foul jokes. Behind adobe walls were the aristocrats' large houses with beautiful gardens, but an economy such as this one would not support many of these estates. Pasargadae was ninety percent an Oriental town of twisted slimy streets between faceless hovels, greasy headcloths and dingy robes, screaming merchants in the bazaars, beggars displaying their sores, traders leading strings of battered camels and overloaded donkeys, dogs raiding offal heaps, tavern music like a cat in a washing machine, men who windmilled their arms and screamed curses—what had ever started that yarn about the inscrutable East?

"Alms, lord. Alms, for the love of Light! Alms, and Mithras will smile upon you!"

"Behold, sir! By my father's beard I swear that never was there finer work from a more skilled hand than this bridle which I offer to you, most fortunate of men, for the ridiculous sum of—"

"This way, master, this way, only four houses down to the finest sarai in all Persia, no, in all the world. Our pallets are stuffed with swan's down, my father serves wine fit for a Devi, my

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mother cooks a pilau whose fame has spread to the ends of the earth, and my sisters are three moons of delight available for a mere—"

Everard ignored the childish runners who clamored at his sides. One of them tugged his ankle; he swore and kicked and the boy grinned without shame. The man hoped to avoid staying at an inn; the Persians were more cleanly than most folk in this age, but there would still be insect life.

He tried not to feel defenseless. Ordinarily a Patrolman could have an ace in the hole: say, a Thirtieth Century stun pistol beneath his coat and a midget radio to call the hidden space-time-antigravity scooter to him. But not when he might be frisked. Everard wore a Greek outfit—tunic and sandals and long wool cloak, sword at waist, helmet and shield hung at the horse's crupper—and only the steel was anachronistic. He could turn to no local branch office if he got into trouble, for this relatively poor and turbulent transition epoch attracted no temporal commerce; the nearest Patrol unit was milieu HQ in Persepolis, a generation futureward.

The streets widened as he pushed on, bazaars thinned out and houses grew larger. At last he emerged in a square enclosed by four mansions. He could see pruned trees above their outer walls. Guards, lean lightly-armed youths, squatted beneath on their heels because standing at attention had not yet been invented. But they rose, nocking wary arrows, as Everard approached. He might simply have crossed the plaza, but he veered and hailed a fellow who looked like a captain.

"Greetings, sir, may the sun fall bright upon you." The Persian which he had learned in an hour under hypno flowed readily off his tongue. "I seek hospitality from some great man who may care to hear my poor tales of foreign travel."

"May your days be many," said the guard. Everard remembered that he must not offer baksheesh: these Persians of Cyrus' own clans were a proud hardy folk, hunters, herdsmen, and warriors. All spoke with the dignified politeness common to their type throughout history. "I serve Croesus the Lydian, servant of the Great King. He will not refuse his roof to—"

"Meander from Athens," supplied Everard. It was an alias which would explain his large bones, light complexion, and short hair. He had, though, been forced to stick a realistic Van Dyke effect on his chin. Herodotus was not the first Greek globetrotter, so an Athenian would not be inconveniently outré. At the same time, half a century before Marathon, Europeans were still uncommon enough here to excite interest.

A slave was called, who got hold

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of the majordomo, who sent another slave, who invited the stranger through the gate. The garden beyond was as cool and green as hoped; there was no fear that anything would be stolen from his baggage in this household; the food and drink should be good; and Croesus himself would certainly interview the guest at length. *We're playing in luck, lad,* Everard assured himself, and accepted a hot bath, fragrant oils, fresh clothing, dates and wine brought to his austerely furnished room equipped with a couch and a pleasant view. He only missed a cigar.

Of attainable things, that is.

To be sure, if Keith had unamendably died—

"Hell and purple frogs," muttered Everard. "Cut that out, will you?"

IV

After sunset it grew chilly. Lamps were lit with ceremony, fire being sacred, and braziers were blown up. A slave prostrated himself to announce that dinner was served. Everard accompanied him down a long hall where vigorous murals showed the Sun and the Bull of Mithras, past a couple of spearmen, and into a small chamber brightly lit, sweet with incense and lavish with carpeting. Two couches were drawn up in the Hellenic manner at a table covered with un-Hellenic dishes of silver and gold; slave waiters hovered in the background and Chinese-sounding music twanged from an inner door.

Croesus of Lydia nodded graciously. He had been handsome once, with regular features, but seemed to have aged quickly in the few years since his wealth and power had become proverbial. Grizzled of beard and long hair, he was dressed in a Grecian chlamys but wore rouge in the Persian manner. "Rejoice, Meander of Athens," he said in Greek, and lifted his face.

Everard kissed his cheek as indicated. It was nice of Croesus thus to imply that Meander's rank was but little inferior to his own, even if Croesus had been eating garlic. "Rejoice, master. I thank you for your kindness."

"This solitary meal was not to demean you," said the ex-king. "I only thought—" He hesitated. "I have always considered myself near kin to the Greeks, and we could talk seriously—"

"My lord honors me beyond my worth." They went through various rituals and finally got to the food. Everard spun out a prepared yarn about his travels; now and then Croesus would ask a disconcertingly sharp question, but a Patrolman soon learned how to evade that kind.

"Indeed times are changing, you are fortunate in coming at the

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very dawn of a new age," said Croesus. "Never has the world known a more glorious King than . . ." etc., etc., doubtless for the benefit of any retainers who doubled as royal spies. Though it happened to be true.

"The very gods have favored our King," went on Croesus. "Had I known how they sheltered him —for truth, I mean, not for the mere fable which I believed it was—I should never have dared oppose myself to him. For it cannot be doubted, he is a Chosen One."

Everard maintained his Greek character by watering the wine and wishing he had picked some less temperate nationality. "What is that tale, my lord?" he asked. "I knew only that the Great King was the son of Cambyses, who held this province as a vassal of Median Astyages. Is there more?"

Croesus leaned forward. In the uncertain light, his eyes held a curious bright look, a Dionysian blend of terror and enthusiasm which Everard's age had long forgotten. "Hear, and bring the account to your countrymen," he said. "Astyages wed his daughter Mandane to Cambyses, for he knew that the Persians were restless under his own heavy yoke and he wished to tie their leaders to his house. But Cambyses became ill and weak. If he died and his infant son Cyrus succeeded in Anshan, there would be a troublesome regency of Persian nobles not bound to Astyages. Dreams also warned the Median king that Cyrus would be the death of his dominion.

"Thereafter Astyages ordered his kinsman, the King's Eye Aurvagaush [Croesus rendered the name Harpagus, as he Hellenized all local names], to do away with the prince. Harpagus took the child despite Queen Mandane's protests; Cambyses lay too sick to help her, nor could Persia in any case revolt without preparation. But Harpagus could not bring himself to the deed. He exchanged the prince for the stillborn child of a herdsman in the mountains, whom he swore to secrecy. The dead baby was wrapped in royal clothes and left on a hillside; presently officials of the Median court were summoned to witness that it had been exposed, and buried it. And our lord Cyrus grew up as a herdsman.

"Cambyses lived for twenty years more without begetting other sons, and not strong enough in his own person to avenge the first-born. But at last he was plainly dying, with no successor whom the Persians would feel obliged to obey. Again Astyages feared trouble. At this time Cyrus came forth, his identity being made known through various signs. Astyages, regretting what had gone before, welcomed him and confirmed him as Cambyses' heir.

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"Cyrus remained a vassal for five years, but found the tyranny of the Medes ever more odious. Harpagus in Ecbatana had also a dreadful thing to avenge: as punishment for his disobedience in the matter of Cyrus, Astyages made Harpagus eat his own son. So Harpagus conspired with certain Median nobles, they chose Cyrus as their leader, Persia revolted, and after three years of war Cyrus made himself the master of the two peoples. Since then, of course, he has added many others. When ever did the gods show their will more plainly?"

Everard lay quiet on the couch for a little. He heard autumn leaves rustle dryly in the garden, under a cold wind.

"This is true, and no fanciful gossip?" he asked.

"I have confirmed it often enough since I joined the Persian court. The King himself has vouched for it to me, as well as Harpagus and others who were directly concerned."

The Lydian could not be lying if he cited his ruler's testimony: the upper-class Persians were fanatics about truthfulness. And yet Everard had heard nothing so incredible in all his Patrol career. For it was the story which Herodotus recorded—with a few modifications to be found in the *Shah Nameh*—and anybody could spot that as a typical hero myth. Essentially the same yarn had been told about Moses, Romulus, Sigurd, a hundred great men. There was no reason to believe it held any fact, no reason to doubt that Cyrus had been raised in a perfectly normal manner at his father's home, had succeeded by plain right of birth and revolted for the usual reasons.

Only, this tall tale was sworn to by eyewitnesses!

There was a mystery here. It brought Everard back to his purpose. After appropriate marveling remarks, he led the conversation until he could say: "I have heard rumors that sixteen years ago a stranger entered Pasargadae, clad as a poor shepherd but in truth a Mage who did miracles. He may have died here. Does my gracious host know anything of it?"

He waited then, tensed. He was playing a hunch, that Keith Denison had not been murdered by some hillbilly, fallen off a cliff and broken his neck, or come to grief in any such way. Because in that case, the scooter should still have been around when the Patrol searched. They might have gridded the area too loosely to find Denison himself, but how could their detectors miss a time hopper?

So, Everard thought, something more complicated had happened. And if Keith survived at all, he would have come down to civilization.

"Sixteen years ago?" Croesus tugged his beard. "I was not here

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then. And surely in any case the land would have been full of portents, for that was when Cyrus left the mountains and took his rightful crown of Anshan. No, Meander, I know nothing of it."

"I have been anxious to find this person," said Everard, "because an oracle . . ." etc., etc.

"You can inquire among the servants and townspeople," suggested Croesus. "I will ask at court on your behalf. You will stay here a while, will you not? Perhaps the King himself will wish to see you —he is interested in foreigners."

The conversation broke up soon after. Croesus explained with a rather sour smile that the Persians believed in early to bed, early to rise, and he must be at the royal palace by dawn. A slave conducted Everard back to his room, where he found a good-looking girl waiting with an expectant smile. He hesitated a moment, remembering a time twenty-four hundred years hence. But—the hell with that. A man had to take whatever the gods offered him, and they were a miserly lot.

## V

It was not long after sunrise when a troop reined up in the plaza and shouted for Meander the Athenian. Everard left his breakfast to go out and stare up a gray stallion, into the hard hairy hawk face of a captain of those guards called the Immortals. The men made a backdrop of restless horses, cloaks and plumes blowing, metal jingling and leather squeaking, the young sun ablaze on polished mail.

"You are summoned by the Chiliarch," rapped the officer. The title he used was actually Persian: commander of the guard and grand vizier of the empire.

Everard stood for a moment, weighing the situation. This was not a very cordial invitation. But he could scarcely plead a previous engagement.

"I hear and obey," he said. "Let me but fetch a small gift from my baggage, in token of the honor paid me."

"The Chiliarch said you were to come at once. Here is a horse."

An archer sentry offered cupped hands, but Everard pulled himself into the saddle without help, a trick it was useful to know in eras before stirrups were introduced. The captain nodded a harsh approval, whirled his mount, and led a gallop off the plaza and up a wide avenue lined with sphinxes and the homes of the great. This was not as heavily trafficked as the bazaar streets, but there were enough riders, chariots, litters, and pedestrians scrambling out of the way. The Immortals stopped for no man. They roared through palace gates flung open before them. Gravel spurted under hoofs. They tore

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around a lawn where fountains sparkled, and clanged to a stop outside the west wing.

The palace, gaudily painted brick, stood on a wide platform with several lesser buildings. The captain himself sprang down, gestured curtly, and strode up a marble staircase. Everard followed, hemmed in by warriors who had taken the light battle axes from their saddlebows for his benefit. The party went among household slaves, robed and turbaned and flat on their faces, through a red and yellow colonnade, down a mosaic hall whose beauty Everard was in no mood to appreciate, and so past a squad of guards into a room where slender columns upheld a peacock dome and the fragrance of late-blooming roses entered through arched windows.

There the Immortals made obeisance. *What's good enough for them is good enough for you, son,* thought Everard, and kissed the Persian carpet. The man on the couch nodded. "Rise and attend," he said. "Fetch a cushion for the Greek." The soldiers took their stance by him. A Nubian bustled forth with a pillow, which he laid on the floor beneath his master's seat. Everard sat down on it, cross-legged. His mouth felt dry.

The Chiliarch, whom he remembered Croesus identifying as Harpagus, leaned forward. Against the tiger skin on the couch and the gorgeous red robe on his own gaunt frame, the Mede showed as an aging man, his shoulder-length hair the color of iron and his dark craggy-nosed face sunken into a mesh of wrinkles. But shrewd eyes considered the newcomer.

"Well," he said, his Persian bearing the rough accent of a North Iranian, "so you are the man from Athens. The noble Croesus spoke of your advent this morning and mentioned some inquiries you were making. Since the safety of the State may be involved, I would know just what it is you seek." He stroked his beard with a jewel-flashing hand and smiled frostily. "It may even be, if your search is harmless, that I can help it."

He had been careful not to employ the usual formulas of greeting, to offer refreshment, or otherwise give Meander the quasi-sacred status of guest. This was an interrogation. "Lord, what is it you wish to know?" asked Everard.

"You sought a Mage in shepherd guise, who entered Pasargadae sixteen summers ago and did miracles." The voice was ugly with tension. "Why is this, and what more have you heard of such matters? Do not pause to invent a lie—speak!"

"Great lord," said Everard, "the oracle at Delphi told me I should mend my fortunes if I learned the fate of a herdsman who entered

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the Persian capital in, er, the third year of the first tyranny of Pisistratus. More than that I have never known. My lord is aware how dark are the oracular sayings."

"Hm, hm." Fear touched the lean countenance and Harpagus drew the sign of the cross, which was a Mithraic sun-symbol. Then, roughly: "What have you discovered so far?"

"Nothing, great lord. No one could tell—"

"You lie!" snarled Harpagus. "All Greeks are liars. Have a care, for you touch on unholy matters. Who else have you spoken to?"

Everard saw a nervous tic lift the Chiliarch's mouth. His own stomach was a cold lump in him. He had stumbled on something which Harpagus had thought safely buried, something so big that the risk of a clash with Croesus, who was duty bound to protect a guest, became nothing. And the most reliable gag ever invented was a snickersnee . . . after rack and pincers had extracted precisely what the stranger knew. . . . *But what the blue hell* do *I know?*

"None, my lord," he husked. "None but the oracle, and the Sun God whose voice the oracle is, and who sent me here, has heard of this before last night."

Harpagus sucked in a sharp breath, taken aback by the invocation. But then, squaring his shoulders. "We have only your word, the word of a Greek, that you were told by an oracle—that you did not spy out State secrets. Or even if the god did indeed send you here, it may as well have been to destroy you for your sins. We shall ask further about this." He nodded at the captain. "Take him below. In the King's name."

The King!

It blazed upon Everard. He jumped to his feet. "Yes, the King!" he shouted. "The god told me . . . there would be a sign . . . and then I should bear his word to the Persian King!"

"Seize him!" yelled Harpagus.

The guardsmen whirled to obey. Everard sprang back, yelling for King Cyrus as loudly as he could. Let them arrest him. Word would be carried to the throne and— Two men hemmed him against the wall, their axes raised. Others pressed behind them. Over their helmets, he saw Harpagus leap up on the couch.

"Take him out and behead him!" ordered the Mede.

"My lord," protested the captain, "he called upon the King."

"To cast a spell! I know him now, the son of Zohak and agent of Ahriman! Kill him!"

"No, wait," cried Everard, "wait, can you not see, it is this traitor who would keep me from telling the King—Let go, you sod."

A hand closed on his right arm. He had been prepared to sit a few hours in jail, till the big boss heard

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of the affair and bailed him out, but matters were a bit more urgent after all. He threw a left hook which ended in a squelching of nose. The guardsman staggered back. Everard plucked the ax from his hand, spun about, and parried the blow of the warrior on his left.

The Immortals attacked. Everard's ax clanged against metal, darted in and smashed a knuckle. He outreached most of these people. But he hadn't a cellophane snowball's chance in hell of standing them off. A blow whistled toward his head. He ducked behind a column; chips flew. An opening — He stiff-armed one man, hopped over the clashing mail-clad form as it fell, and got onto open floor under the dome.

Harpugus scuttled up, drawing a saber from beneath his robe; the old bastard was brave enough. Everard twirled to meet him, so that the Chiliarch was between him and the guards. Ax and sword rattled together. Everard tried to close in . . . a clinch would keep the Persians from throwing their weapons at him, but they were circling to get at his rear. Judas, this might be the end of one more Patrolman—

"Halt! Fall on your faces! The King comes!"

Thrice it was blared. The guardsmen froze in their tracks, stared at the gigantic scarlet-robed person who stood bellowing in the doorway, and hit the rug. Harpagus dropped his sword. Almost, Everard brained him; then, remembering, and hearing the hurried tramp of warriers in the hall, let go his own weapon. For a moment he and the Chiliarch panted into each other's faces.

"The King! The King!" bellowed the herald.

Everard joined Harpagus on the floor.

A band of Immortals trotted into the room and made an alley to the couch. A chamberlain dashed to throw a special tapestry over it. Then Cyrus himself entered, robe billowing around long muscular strides. A few courtiers followed, leathery men privileged to bear arms in the royal presence, and a slave M.C. wringing his hands in their wake at not having been given time to spread a carpet or summon musicians.

The King's voice rang through silence, "What is this? Where is the stranger who called on me?"

Everard risked a peek. Cyrus was tall, broad of shoulder and slim of body, older-looking than Croesus' account suggested—he was forty-seven years old, Everard knew with a shudder—but kept supple by sixteen years of war and the chase. He had a narrow dark countenance with hazel eyes, a sword scar on the left cheekbone, a straight nose and full lips. His black hair, faintly grizzled, was brushed back and his beard trimmed more closely than was

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Persian custom. He was dressed as plainly as his status allowed.

"Where is the stranger whom the slave ran to tell me of?"

"I am he, Great King," said Everard.

"Arise. Declare your name."

Everard stood up and murmured: "Hi, Keith."

VI

Vines rioted about a marble pergola. They almost hid the archers who ringed it. Keith Denison slumped on a bench, stared at leaf shadows dappled onto the floor, and said wryly, "At least we can keep our talk private. The English language hasn't been invented yet."

After a moment he continued, with a rusty accent: "Sometimes I've thought that was the hardest thing to take about this situation, never having a minute to myself. The best I can do is throw everybody out of the room I'm in; but they stick around just beyond the door, under the windows, guarding, listening. I hope their dear loyal souls fry."

"Privacy hasn't been invented yet either," Everard reminded him. "And VIP's like you never did have much, in all history."

Denison raised a tired visage. "I keep wanting to ask how Cynthia is," he said, "but of course for her it has been—will be—not so long. A week, perhaps. Did you by any chance bring some cigarets?"

"Left 'em in the scooter," said Everard. "I figured I'd have trouble enough without explaining that away. I never expected to find you running this whole shebang."

"I didn't myself." Denison shrugged. "It was the damnedest fantastic thing. The time paradoxes—"

"So what did happen?"

Denison rubbed his eyes and sighed. "I got myself caught in the local gears. You know, sometimes everything that went before seems unreal to me, like a dream. Were there ever such things as Christendom, contrapuntal music, or the Bill of Rights? Not to mention all the people I knew. You yourself don't belong here, Manse, I keep expecting to wake up— Well. Let me think back.

"Do you know what the situation was? The Medes and the Persians are pretty near kin, racially and culturally, but the Medes were top dog then, and they'd picked up a lot of habits from the Assyrians which didn't sit so well in the Persian viewpoint. We're ranchers and freehold farmers, mostly, and of course it isn't right that we should be vassals—" Denison blinked. "Hey, there I go again! What do I mean, 'we?' Anyway, Persia was restless. King Astyages of Media had ordered the murder of little Prince Cyrus twenty years before, but now he regretted it,

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because Cyrus' father was dying and the dispute over succession could touch off a civil war.

"Well, I appeared in the mountains. I had to scout a little bit in both space and time—hopping through a few days and several miles—to find a good hiding place for my scooter. That's why the Patrol couldn't locate it afterward . . . part of the reason. You see, I did finally park it in a cave and set out on foot, but right away I came to grief. A Median army was bound through that region to discourage the Persians from making trouble. One of their scouts saw me emerge, checked my back trail —first thing I knew, I'd been seized and their officer was grilling me about what that gadget was I had in the cave. His men took me for a magician of some kind and were in considerable awe, but more afraid of showing fear than they were of me. Naturally, the word ran like a brushfire through the ranks and across the countryside. Soon all the area knew that a stranger had appeared under remarkable circumstances.

"The general was Harpagus himself, as smart and tough-minded a devil as the world has ever seen. He thought I could be used. He ordered me to make my brazen horse perform, but I wasn't allowed to mount it. However, I did get a chance to kick it into time-drive. That's why the search party didn't find the thing. It was only a few hours in this century, then it probably went clear back to the Beginning."

"Good work," said Everard.

"Oh, I knew the orders forbidding that degree of anachronism." Denison's lips twisted. "But I also expected the Patrol to rescue me. If I'd known they wouldn't, I'm not so sure I'd have stayed a good self-sacrificing patrolman. I might have hung on to my scooter, and played Harpagus' game till a chance came to escape on my own."

Everard looked at him a moment, somberly. Keith had changed, he thought: not just in age, but the years among aliens had marked him more deeply than he knew. "If you risked altering the future," he said, "you risked Cynthia's existence."

"Yes. Yes, true. I remember thinking of that . . . at the time."

Denison leaned forward, elbows on knees, staring into the pergola screen. His words continued, flat. "Harpagus spit rivets, of course. I thought for a while he was going to kill me. I was carried off, trussed up like butcher's meat. But as I told you, there were already rumors about me, which were losing nothing in repetition. Harpagus saw a still better chance. He gave me a choice, string along with him or have my throat cut. What else could I do? It wasn't even a matter of hazarding an alteration; I soon saw I was playing a role which history had *already* written.

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"You see, Harpagus bribed a herdsman to support his tale, and produced me as Cyrus, son of Cambyses."

Everard nodded, unsurprised. "What's in it for him?" he asked.

"At the time, he only wanted to bolster the Median rule. A king in Anshan under his thumb would have to be loyal to Astyages, and thereby help keep all the Persians in line. I was rushed along, too bewildered to do more than follow his lead, still hoping minute by minute for a Patrol hopper to appear and get me out of the mess. The truth fetish of all these Iranian aristocrats helped us a lot—few of them suspected I perjured myself in swearing I was Cyrus, though I imagine Astyages quietly ignored the discrepancies. And put Harpagus in his place by punishing him in a specially gruesome way for not having done away with Cyrus as ordered—even if Cyrus turned out to be useful now—and of course the double irony was that Harpagus really had followed orders, two decades before!

"As for me, in the course of five years I got more and more sickened by Astyages myself. Now, looking back, I see he wasn't really such a hound from hell, just a typical Oriental monarch of the ancient world, but that's kind of hard to appreciate when you're forced to watch a man being racked.

"So Harpagus, wanting revenge, engineered a revolt, and I accepted the leadership of it which he offered me." Denison grinned crookedly. "After all, I was Cyrus the Great, with a destiny to play out. We had a rough time at first. The Medes clobbered us again and again, but you know, Manse, I found myself enjoying it. Not like that wretched Twentieth Century business of sitting in a foxhole wondering if the enemy barrage will ever let up. Oh, war is miserable enough here, especially if you're a buck private when disease breaks out, as it always does. But when you fight, by God, you fight, with your own hands! I even found a talent for that sort of thing. We've pulled some gorgeous stunts." Everard watched life flow black into him; he sat up straight and said with laughter in his voice: "Like the time the Lydian cavalry had us outnumbered. We sent our baggage camels in the van, with the infantry behind and horse last. Croesus' nags got a whiff of the camels and stampeded. For all I know, they're running yet. We mopped him up!"

He jarred to silence, stared a while into Everard's eyes, and bit his lip. "Sorry. I keep forgetting. Now and then I remember I was not a killer at home—after a battle, when I see the dead scattered around, and worst of all the wounded. But I couldn't help it, Manse! I've had to fight! First there was the revolt. If I hadn't played along with Harpagus, how

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long do you think I'd have lasted, personally? And then there's been the realm itself. I didn't ask the Lydians to invade us, or the eastern barbarians. Have you ever seen a town sacked by Turanians, Manse? It's them or us, and when *we* conquer somebody we don't march them off in chains; they keep their own lands and customs and— For Mithras' sake, Manse, could I do anything else?"

Everard sat listening to the garden rustle under a breeze. At last: "No. I understand. I hope it hasn't been too lonesome."

"I got used to it," said Denison carefully. "Harpagus is an acquired taste, but interesting. Croesus turned out to be a very decent fellow. Kobad the Mage has some original thoughts, and he's the only man alive who dares beat me at chess. And there's the the feasting, and hunting, and women—" He gave the other a defiant look. "Yeah. What else would you have me do?"

"Nothing," said Everard. "Sixteen years is a long time."

"Cassandane, my chief wife, is worth a lot of the trouble I've had. Though Cynthia —God in heaven, Manse!" Denison stood up and laid hands on Everard's shoulders. The fingers closed with bruising strength; they had held ax, bow, and bridle for a decade and a half. The King of the Persians shouted:

"How are you going to get me out of here?"

## VII

Everard rose too, walked to the floor's edge and stared through lacy stonework, thumbs hooked in his belt and head lowered.

"I don't see how," he answered.

Denison smote a fist into one palm. "I've been afraid of that. Year by year I've grown more afraid that if the Patrol ever finds me it'll — You've got to help."

"I tell you, I can't!" Everard's voice cracked. He did not turn around. "You've thought about it. You're not some lousy little barbarian chief whose career won't make a jot of difference a hundred years from now. You're Cyrus, the founder of the Persian Empire, a key figure in a key milieu. If Cyrus goes, so does the whole future! There won't have been any Twentieth Century with Cynthia in it."

"Are you *certain*?"

"I really boned up on the facts before hopping here," said Everard. "Stop kidding youself. We're prejudiced against the Persians because at one time they were the enemies of Greece, and we happen to get some of the more conspicuous features of our own culture from Hellenic sources. But the Persians are at least as important!

"You've watched it happen. Sure, they're pretty brutal by your standards: the whole era is—including the Greeks. And they're not democratic, but you can't blame them for not making a

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European invention outside their whole mental horizon. What counts is this—

"Persia was the first conquering power which made an effort to respect and conciliate the people it took over; which obeyed its own laws; which pacified enough territory to open steady contact with the Far East; which created a viable world-religion, Zoroastrianism, not limited to any one race or locality. Maybe you don't know how much Christian belief and ritual is of Mithraic origin, but believe me, it's plenty. Not to mention Judaism, which you, Cyrus the Great, are personally going to rescue. Remember? You'll take over Babylon and allow those Israelites who've kept their identity to return home; without you, they'd be swallowed up and lost in the general ruck, as the ten other tribes already have been.

"Even when it gets decadent, the Persian Empire will be a matrix for civilization. What were most of Alexander's conquests but just taking over Persian territory? And *that* spread Hellenism through the known world! And there'll be Persian successor states, Pontus, Parthia, the Persia of Firduzi and Omar and Hafiz, the Iran we know and the Iran of a future beyond the Twentieth Century—"

Everard turned on his heel. "If you quit," he said, "I can imagine them still building ziggurats and reading entrails—and running through the woods up in Europe with America undiscovered—three thousand years from now!"

Denison sagged. "Yeah," he answered. "I thought so."

He paced a while, hands behind his back. The dark face looked older each minute. "Thirteen more years," he murmured, almost to himself. "In thirteen years I'll fall in battle against the nomads. I don't know exactly how. One way or another, circumstances will force me to it. Why not? They've forced me into everything else I've done, willy-nilly. . . . In spite of everything I can do to train him, I know my own son Cambyses will turn out to be a sadistic incompetent and it will take Darius to save the empire—God!" He covered his face with a flowing sleeve. "Excuse me. I do despise self-pity, but I can't help this."

Everard sat down, avoiding the sight. He heard how the breath rattled in Denison's lungs.

Finally the King poured wine into two chalices, joined Everard on the bench and said in a dry tone: "Sorry. I'm okay now. And I haven't given up yet."

"I can refer your problem to headquarters," said Everard with a touch of sarcasm.

Denison echoed it: "Thanks, little chum. I remember their attitude well enough. We're expendable. They'll interdict the entire

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lifetime of Cyrus to visitors, just so I won't be tempted, and send me a nice message. They will point out that I'm the absolute monarch of a civilized people, with palaces, slaves, vintages, chefs, entertainers, concubines, and hunting grounds at my disposal in unlimited quantities, so what am I complaining about? No, Manse, this is something you and I will have to work out between us."

Everard clenched his fists till he felt the nails bit into the palms. "You're putting me in a hell of a spot, Keith," he said.

"I'm only asking you to think on the problem—and Ahriman damn you, you will!" Again the fingers closed on his flesh, and the conqueror of the East snapped forth a command. The old Keith would never have taken that tone, thought Everard, anger flickering up; and he thought:

*If you don't come home, and Cynthia is told that you never will —she could come back and join you, one more foreign girl in the King's harem won't affect history. But if I reported to headquarters before seeing her, reported the problem as insoluble, which it doubtless is in fact . . . why, then the reign of Cyrus would be interdicted and she could not join you.*

"I've been over this ground before, with myself," said Denison more calmly. "I know the implications as well as you do. But look, I can show you the cave where my machine rested for those few hours. You could go back to the moment I appeared there and warn me."

"No," said Everard. "That's out. Two reasons. First, the regulation against that sort of thing, which is a sensible one. They might make an exception under different circumstances, but there's a second reason too: you are Cyrus. They're not going to wipe out an entire future for one man's sake."

*Would I do it for one woman's sake? I'm not sure. I hope not. . . . Cynthia wouldn't have to know the facts. It would be kinder if she didn't. I could use my Unattached authority to keep the truth secret from lower echelons and tell her nothing except that Keith had irrevocably died under circumstances which forced us to shut off this period to time traffic. She'd grieve a while, of course, but she's too healthy to mourn forever. . . . Sure, it's a lousy trick. But wouldn't it be kinder in the long run than letting her come back here, to servile status, and share her man with at least the dozen princesses that politics force him to be married to? Wouldn't it be better for her to make a clean break and a fresh start, among her own people?*

"Uh-huh," said Denison. "I mentioned that idea only to dispose of it. But there must be some other way. Look, Manse, sixteen years ago a situation existed from which

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everything else has followed, not through human caprice but through the sheer logic of events. Suppose I had not showed up? Mightn't Harpagus have found a different pseudo-Cyrus? The exact identity of the King doesn't matter. Another Cyrus would have acted differently from me in a million day-to-day details. Naturally. But if he wasn't a hopeless moron or maniac, if he was a reasonably able and decent person—give me credit for being that much—then his career would have been the same as mine in all the important ways, the ways that got into the history books. You know that as well as I do. Except at the crucial points, time always reverts to its own shape. The small differences damp out in days or years, negative feedback. It's only at key instants that a positive feedback can be set up and the effects multiply with passing time, instead of disappearing. You know that!"

"Sure," said Everard. "But judging from your own account, your appearance in the cave *was* crucial. It was that which put the idea in Harpagus' head. Without it—well, I can imagine a decadent Median Empire falling apart, maybe falling prey to Lydia, or to the Turanians, because the Persians wouldn't have had the kind of royal divine-right-by-birth leadership they needed — No. I wouldn't come near that moment in the cave without authorization from anyone less than a Daneelian."

Denison looked at him over a raised chalice, lowered it and kept on looking. His face congealed into a stranger's. He said at last, very softly:

"You don't want me to come back, do you?"

Everard leaped off the bench. He dropped his own cup, it rang on the floor and wine ran from it like blood.

"Shut up!" he yelled.

Denison nodded. "I am the King," he said. "If I raise my finger, those guards will hack you in pieces."

"That's a hell of a way to get my help," growled Everard.

Denison's body jerked. He sat motionless for a while, before he got out: "I'm sorry. You don't realize what a shock— Oh, yes, yes, it hasn't been a bad life. It's had more color in it than most, and this business of being quasi-divine grows on you. I suppose that's why I'll take the field beyond the Jaxartes, thirteen years from now: because I can't do anything else, with all those young lion eyes on me. Hell. I may even think it was worth it."

His expression writhed smilewards. "Some of my girls have been absolute knockouts. And there's always Cassandane. I made her my chief wife because in a dark way she reminds me of Cynthia. I think. It's hard to tell, after all this time. The Twentieth Cen-

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tury isn't real to me. And there's more actual satisfaction in a good horse than a sports car . . . and I know my work here is valuable, which isn't a knowledge granted to many. . . . Yeh. I'm sorry I barked at you. I know you'd help if you dared. Since you don't, and I don't blame you, you needn't regret it for my sake."

"Cut that out!" groaned Everard.

It felt as if there were gears in his brain, spinning against emptiness. Overhead he saw a painted roof, where a youth killed a bull, and the Bull was the Sun and the Man. Beyond columns and vines trod guards in dragon skin mail-coats, their bows strung, their faces like carved wood. The harem wing of the palace could be glimpsed, where a hundred or a thousand young women counted themselves fortunate to await the King's occasional pleasure. Beyond the city walls lay harvest fields where peasants readied sacrifice to an Earth Mother who was old in this land when the Aryans came, and that was in a dark pre-dawn past. High floated the mountains, haunted by wolf, lion, boar and demon. It was too alien a place. Everard had thought himself hardened to otherness, but now he wanted suddenly to run and hide, up to his own century and his own people, and to a forgetting.

He said in a careful voice, "Let me consult a few associates. We can check the whole period in detail. There might be some kind of switch point where—I'm not competent to handle this alone, Keith. Let me go back upstairs and get some advice. If we work out anything we'll return to . . . this very night."

"Where's your scooter?" asked Denison.

Everard waved a hand. "Up in the hills."

Denison stroked his beard. "You aren't telling me more than that, eh? Well, it's wise. I'm not sure I'd trust myself, if I knew where a time machine could be gotten."

"I don't mean that!" shouted Everard.

"Oh, never mind. Let's not fight about it." Denison sighed. "Sure, go on home and see what you can do. Want an escort?"

"Better not. It isn't necessary, is it?"

"No. We've made this area safer than Central Park."

"That isn't saying much." Everard held out his hand. "Just get me back my horse. I'd hate to lose him: special Patrol animal, trained to time hop." His gaze closed with the other man's. "I'll return. In person. Whatever the decision is."

"Sure, Manse," said Denison.

They walked out together, to go through the various formalities of notifying guardsmen and gatekeepers. Denison indicated a pal-

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ace bedchamber where he said he would be every night for a week, as a rendezvous. And then at last Everard kissed the King's feet, and when the royal presence had departed he got aboard his horse and jogged slowly out through the palace gates.

He felt empty inside. There was really nothing to be done; and he had promised to come back himself and pass that sentence upon the King.

VIII

Late that day he was in the hills, where cedars gloomed above cold, brawling brooks and the side road onto which he had turned became a rutted upward track. Though arid enough, the Iran of this age still had a few such forests. The horse plodded beneath him, worn down. He should find some herdsman's house and request lodging, simply to spare the creature. But no, there would be a full moon, he could walk if he must and reach the scooter before sunrise. He didn't think he could sleep.

A place of long sere grass and ripe berries did invite him to rest, though. He had food in the saddlebags, a wineskin, and a stomach unfilled since dawn. He clucked encouragingly to the horse and turned.

Something caught his eye. Far down the road, level sunlight glowed off a dust cloud. It grew bigger even as he watched. Several riders, he guessed, coming in one devil of a hurry. King's messengers? But why, into this section? Uneasiness tickled his nerves. He put on his helmet cap, buckled the helmet itself above, hung shield on arm and loosened the short sword in its sheath. Doubtless the party would just hurrah on past him, but—

Now he could see that there were eight men. They had good horseflesh beneath them, and the rearmost led a string of remounts. Nevertheless the animals were pretty jaded, sweat had made streaks down their dusty flanks and manes were plastered to necks. It must have been a long gallop. The riders were decently clad in the usual full white pants, shirt, boots, cloak, and tall brimless hat: not courtiers or professional soldiers, but not bandits either. They were armed with sabers, bows, and lariats.

Suddenly Everard recognized the graybeard at their head. It exploded in him: Harpagus!

And through whirling gray he could also see that even for ancient Iranians, the followers were a tough-looking crew.

"Oh, oh," said Everard, half aloud. "School's out."

His mind clicked over. There wasn't time to be afraid, only to think. Harpagus had no other obvious motive for skiting into the

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hills than to catch the Greek Meander. Surely, in a court riddled with spies and blabbermouths, Harpagus would have learned within an hour that the King spoke to the stranger as an equal in some unknown tongue, and let him go back northward. It would take the Chiliarch a while longer to manufacture some excuse for leaving the palace, round up his personal bully boys, and give chase. Why? Because "Cyrus" had once appeared in these uplands, riding some device which Harpagus had coveted. No fool, the Mede might well have been unsatisfied with the evasive yarn Keith had handed him. It would seem reasonable that one day another Mage from the King's home country must appear; and this time Harpagus would not let the engine go from him so easily.

Everard paused no longer. They were only a hundred yards away. He could see the Chiliarch's eyes glitter beneath shaggy brows. He spurred his horse, off the road and across the meadow.

"Stop!" yelled a remembered voice behind him. "Stop, Greek!"

Everard got an exhausted trot out of his mount. The cedars threw long shadows across him.

"Stop or we shoot! . . . Halt! . . . Shoot, then! Not to kill! Get the steed!"

At the forest edge, Everard slipped from his saddle. He heard an angry whirr and a score of thumps. The horse screamed. Everard cast a glance behind, the poor beast was on its knees. By God, somebody would pay for this! But he was one man and they were eight. He hurried under the trees. A shaft smote a trunk by his left shoulder, burying itself.

He ran, crouched, zigzag in a chilly sweet-smelling twilight. Now and then a low branch whipped across his face. He could have used more underbrush, there were some Algonquin stunts for a hunted man to try, but at least the soft floor was noiseless under his sandals. The Persians were lost to sight. Almost instinctively, they had tried to ride after him. Cracking and crashing and loud obscenities ripped the air to show how well that had worked.

They'd come on foot in a minute. He cocked his head. A faint rush of water. . . . He moved in its direction, up a steep boulder-strewn slope. His hunters were not helpless urbanites, he thought. At least some of them were sure to be mountaineers, with eyes to read the dimmest signs of his passage. He had to break the trail; then he could hole up until Harpagus must return to court duties. The breath grew harsh in his throat. Behind him voices snapped forth, a note of decision, but he couldn't make out what was said. Too far. And the blood pounded so loudly in his ears.

If Harpagus had fired on the

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King's guest, then Harpagus surely did not intend that that guest should ever report it to the King. Capture, torture till he revealed where the machine lay and how to operate it, and a final mercy of cold steel—such would be the program. *Judas,* thought Everard through the clamor in his veins, *I've mucked this operation up till it's a manual of how not to be a Patrolman. And the first item is, don't think so hard about a certain girl who isn't yours that you neglect elementary precautions.*

He came out on the edge of a high, wet bank. A brook roiled valleyward below him. They'd see he had come this far, but it would be a toss-up which way he splashed in the stream-bed . . . Which should it be, anyhow? . . . The mud was cold and slippery on his skin as he scrambled down. Better go upstream. That would bring him closer to his scooter, and Harpagus might assume it more likely he'd try to double back to the King.

Stones bruised his feet and the water numbed them. The trees made a wall above either bank, so that he was roofed by a narrow strip of sky whose blue deepened momentarily. High up there floated an eagle. The air grew colder. But he had one piece of luck—the brook twisted like a snake in delirium, and he had quickly slipped and stumbled his way from sight of his entry point. *I'll go on a mile or so,* he thought, *and maybe there'll be an overhanging branch I can grab so I won't leave an outgoing trail.* Slow minutes passed.

*So I get to the scooter,* he thought, *and go upstairs and ask my chiefs for help. I know damn well they aren't going to give me any. Why not sacrifice one man to insure their own existence and everything they care about? Therefore Keith is stuck here, with thirteen years to go till the barbarians cut him down. But Cynthia will still be young in thirteen years, and after so long a nightmare of exile and knowing her man's time to die, she'd be cut off, an alien in an interdicted era, alone in the frightened court of mad Cambyses II. . . . No, I've got to keep the truth from her, keep her at home, thinking Keith "is" dead. He'd want it that way himself. And after a year or two she'd be happy again; I could teach her to be happy.*

He had stopped noticing how the rocks smashed at his thin-shod feet, how his body pitched and staggered or how noisy the water was. But then he came around a bend and saw the Persians.

There were two of them, wading downstream. Evidently his capture meant enough to overcome their religious prejudice against defiling a river. Two more walked above, threading between the trees on either bank. One of

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the latter was Harpagus. Their long swords hissed from the scabbards.

"Stop!" called the Chiliarch. "Halt, Greek! Yield!"

Everard stood death-still. The water purled about his ankles. The pair who splashed to meet him were unreal, down here in a well of shadow, their dark faces were blotted out so that he saw only white clothes and a shimmer along saber blades. It hit him in the belly: the pursuers had seen his trail down into the brook. So they split up, half in each direction, running faster on solid ground than he could move in the bed. Having gone beyond his possible range, they started working their way back, more slowly when they were bound to the stream's course but quite certain of their quarry.

"Take him alive," reminded Harpagus. "Hamstring him if you must, but take him alive."

Everard snarled and turned toward that bank. "Okay, buster, you asked for it," he said in English. The two men in the water yelled and began to run. One tripped and went on his face. The man opposite tobogganed down the slope on his backside.

The mud was slippery. Everard chopped the lower edge of his shield into it and toiled up. Harpagus moved coolly to await him. As he came near, the old noble's blade whirred, striking from above. Everard rolled his head and caught the blow on his helmet which bonged. The edge slid down a cheekpiece and cut his right shoulder, but not badly, he felt only a sting and then was too busy to feel anything.

He didn't expect to win out. But he would make them kill him, and pay for the privilege.

He came onto grass and raised shield just in time to protect his eyes. Harpagus probed for the knees. Everard beat that aside with his own short sword. The Median saber whistled. But at close quarters a lightly-armed Asian hadn't a chance against the hoplite, as history was to prove a couple of generations hence. *By God,* thought Everard, *if only I had cuirass and greaves, I might be able to take all four of 'em!* He used his big shield with skill, put it in front of every blow and thrust, and always worked near to get beneath the longer blade and into Harpagus' defenseless guts.

The Chiliarch grinned tautly, through tangled gray whiskers, and skipped away. A play for time, of course. It succeeded. The other three men climbed the bank, shouted and rushed. It was a disorderly attack. Superb fighters as individuals, the Persians had never developed the mass discipline of Europe, on which they would break themselves at Marathon and Gaugamela. But four against unarmored one were impossible odds.

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Everard got his back to a tree bole. The first man came in recklessly, sword clashing on the Greek shield. Everard's blade darted from behind the bronze oblong. There was a soft, somehow heavy resistance. He knew that feeling from other days, pulled his weapon out and stepped quickly aside. The Persian sat down, spilling out his life. He groaned once, saw he was a dead man, and raised his face toward the sky.

His mates were already at Everard, one to a side. Overhanging boughs made lassos useless, they would have to do battle. The Patrolman held off the left-hand blade with his shield. That exposed his right ribs, but since his opponents were ordered not to kill he could afford it. The right-hand man slashed at Everard's ankles. Everard sprang in the air, the sword hissed under his feet. The left-hand attacker stabbed low. Everard sensed a dull shock and saw steel in his calf. He jerked free. A sunset ray came between bunched needles and touched the blood, making it an impossibly brilliant red. Everard felt that leg buckle under him.

"So, so," cried Harpagus, hovering ten feet away. "Chop him!"

Everard growled above his shield rim: "A task your jackal leader has no courage to attempt for himself, after I drove him back with his tail between his legs!"

It was calculated. The attack on him stopped, a bare instant. He reeled forward. "If you Persians must be the dogs of a Mede," he croaked, "can you not choose a Mede who is a man, rather than this creature which betrayed its king and now runs from a single Greek?"

Even this far west and this long ago, an Oriental could not lose face in such a manner. Not that Harpagus had ever been a coward; Everard knew how unfair his taunts were. But the Chiliarch spat a curse and dashed at him. Everard had a moment's glimpse of eyes wild in a sunken hook-nosed face. He lumbered lopsidedly forward. The two Persians hesitated for a second more. That was long enough for Everard and Harpagus to meet. The Median saber rose and fell, bounced off Greek helmet and shield, snaked sideways for another leg cut. A loose white tunic flapped before Everard's gaze. He hunched shoulders and drove his sword in.

He withdrew it with the cruel professional twist which assures a mortal wound, pivoted on his right heel, and caught a blow on his shield. For a minute he and one Persian traded fury. At the edge of an eye, he saw the other circling about to get behind him. Well, he thought in a remote way, he had killed the one man dangerous to Cynthia. . . .

"Hold! Halt!"

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The call was a weak flutter in the air, less loud than the mountain stream, but the warriors stepped back and lowered their blades. Even the dying Persian took his eyes from heaven.

Harpagus struggled to sit up, in a puddle of his own blood. His skin was turned gray. "No . . . hold," he whispered. "Wait. There is a purpose here. Mithras would not have struck me down unless—"

He beckoned, a somehow lordly gesture. Everard dropped his sword, limped over and knelt by Harpagus. The Mede sank back into his arms.

"You are from the King's homeland," it rasped in the bloody beard. "Do not deny that. But know . . . Aurvagaush the son of Khshayavarsha . . . is no traitor" The thin form stiffened itself, imperious, as if ordering death to wait upon its pleasure. "I knew there were powers—of heaven, of hell, I know not which to this day—powers behind the King's advent. I used them, I used him, not for myself, but because I had sworn loyalty to my own king, Astyages, and he needed a . . . a Cyrus . . . lest the realm be torn asunder. Afterward, by his cruelty, Astyages forfeited my oath. But I was still a Mede. I saw in Cyrus the only hope—the best hope—of Media. For he has been a good king to us also—we are honored in his domains second only to the Persians. . . . Do you understand, you from the King's home?" Dim eyes rolled about, trying to see into Everard's but without enough control. "I wanted to capture you—to force your engine and its use from you, and then to kill you—yes—but not for my own gain. It was for the realm's. I feared you would take the King home, as I know he has longed to go. And what would become of us?—Be merciful, as you too must hope for mercy."

"I shall," said Everard. "The King will remain."

"It is well," sighed Harpagus. "I believe you speak the truth . . . I dare not believe otherwise. . . . Then I have atoned?" he asked in a thin anxious voice. "For the murder I did at my old king's behest—that I laid a helpless infant upon the mountainside and watched him die—have I atoned, King's countryman? For it was that Prince's death . . . which brought the land close to ruin . . . but I found another Cyrus! I saved us! Have I atoned?"

"You have," said Everard, and wondered how much absolution it lay in his power to give.

Harpagus closed his eyes. "Then leave me," he said, like the fading echo of a command.

Everard laid him upon the earth and hobbled away. The two Persians knelt by their master, performing certain rites. The third man returned to his own contemplations. Everard sat down under a tree, tore a strip from his cloak

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and bandaged his hurts. The leg cut would need attention. Somehow he must get to the scooter, that wouldn't be fun, but he could manage it and then a Patrol doctor could repair him in a few hours with a medical science future to his home era. He'd go to some branch office in an obscure milieu, because there'd be too many questions in the Twentieth Century.

And he couldn't afford that. If his superiors knew what he planned, they would probably forbid it.

The answer had come to him not as a blinding revelation, but as a tired consciousness of knowledge which he might well have had subconsciously for a long time. He leaned back, getting his breath. The other four Persians arrived and were told what had happened. All of them ignored Everard, except for glances where terror struggled with pride and made furtive signs against evil. They lifted their dead chief and their dying companion and bore them into the forest. Darkness thickened. Somewhere an owl hooted.

IX

The Great King sat up in bed There had been a noise beyond its curtains.

Cassandane the Queen stirred invisibly. One slim hand touched his face. "What is it, sun of my heaven?" she asked.

"I do not know." He fumbled for the sword which lay always beneath his pillow. "Nothing."

Her palm slipped down over his breast. "No, it is much," she whispered, suddenly shaken. "Your heart goes like a war-drum."

"Stay there." He trod out past the drapes.

Moonlight streamed from a deep-purple sky, through an arched window to the floor. It glanced almost blindingly off a bronze mirror. The air was cold upon bare skin.

A thing of dark metal, whose rider gripped two handlebars and touched tiny controls on a panel, drifted like another shadow. It landed on the carpet without a sound and the rider got off. He was a burly man in Grecian tunic and helmet.

"Keith," he breathed.

"Manse!" Denison stepped into the moonlight. "You came!"

"Tell me more," snorted Everard sarcastically. "Think anybody will hear us? I don't believe I was noticed. Materialized directly over the roof and floated slowly down on antigrav."

"There are guards just outside the door," said Denison, "But they won't come in unless I strike that gong, or yell."

"Good. Put on some clothes."

Denison dropped his sword. He stood rigid for an instant, then it blazed from him: "You've got a way out?"

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"Maybe. Maybe." Everard looked away from the other man, drummed fingers on his machine's control panel. "Look, Keith," he said at last, "I've an idea which might or might not work. I'll need your help to carry it out. If it does work, you can go home. The front office will accept a *fait accompli* and wink at any broken regulations. But if it fails, you'll have to come back to this very night and live out your life as Cyrus. Can you do that?"

Denison shivered with more than chill. Very low: "I think so."

"I'm stronger than you are," said Everard roughly, "and I'll have the only weapons. If necessary, I'll shanghai you back here. Please don't make me."

Denison drew a long breath. "I won't."

"Then let's hope the Norns cooperate. Come on, get dressed. I'll explain as we go. Kiss this year goodbye, and trust it isn't, 'So long' —because if my notion pans out, neither you nor anyone else will ever see it again."

Denison, who had half turned to the garments thrown in a corner for a slave to replace before dawn, stopped. "What?" he said.

"We're going to try rewriting history," said Everard. "Or maybe to restore the history which was there in the first place. I don't know. Come on, hop to it!"

"But—"

"Quick, man, quick! D' you realize I came back to the same day as I left you, that at this moment I'm crawling through the mountains with one leg stabbed open, just to save you that extra time? Get moving!"

Decision closed upon Denison. His face was in darkness, but he spoke very low and clear: "I've got one personal goodbye to say."

"What?"

"Cassandane. She's been my wife here for, God, for fourteen years! She's borne me three children, and nursed me through two fevers and a hundred fits of despair, and once when the Medes were at our gates she led the women of Pasargadae out to rally us and we won— Give me five minutes, Manse."

"All right, all right. Though it'll take more than that to send a eunuch to her room and—"

"She's here."

Denison vanished behind the bed curtains.

Everard stood for a moment as if struck. *You expected me to come tonight*, he thought, *and you hoped I'd be able to take you back to Cynthia. So you sent for Cassandane.*

And then, when his fingers had begun to hurt from the tightness of his grip on the sword hilt: *Oh, shut up, Everard, you smug self-righteous whelp.*

Presently Denison came back. He did not speak as he put on his clothes and mounted the rear seat

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on the scooter. Everard space-hopped, an instantaneous jump; the room vanished and moonlight flooded the hills far below. A cold gust searched around the men in the sky.

"Now for Ecbatana." Everard turned on his dash light and adjusted controls according to notes scribbled on the pilot pad.

"Ec– Oh, you mean Hagmatan? The old Median capital?" Denison sounded astonished. "But it's only a summer residence now."

"I mean Ecbatana thirty-six years ago," said Everard.

"Look, all the scientific historians in the future are convinced that the story of Cyrus' childhood as told by Herodotus and the Persians is pure fable. Well, maybe they were right all along, maybe your experiences here have been only one of those little quirks in space-time which the Patrol tries to eliminate."

"I see," said Denison slowly.

"You were at Astyages' court pretty often when you were his vassal, I suppose. Okay, you guide me. We want the old guy himself, preferably alone at night."

"Sixteen years was a long time," said Denison.

"Hm?"

"If you're going to change the past anyway, why use me at this point? Come get me when I'd been Cyrus only one year, long enough to be familiar with Ecbatana but–"

"Sorry, no. I don't dare. We're steering close enough to the wind as is. Lord knows what a secondary loop in the world lines could lead to. Even if we got away with it, the Patrol would send us both to the exile planet for taking that kind of chance."

"Well . . . yes. I see your point."

"Also," said Everard, "you're not a suicidal type. Would you actually want the you of this instant never to have existed? Think for a minute precisely what that implies."

He completed his settings. The man behind him shuddered. "Mithras!" said Denison. "You're right. Let's not talk more about it."

"Here goes, then." Everard threw the main switch.

He hung over a walled city on an unfamiliar plain. Though this was also a moonlit night, it was only a black huddle to his eyes. He reached into the saddlebags. "Here," he said. "Let's put on these costumes. I had the boys in the Middle Mohenjodaro office fix 'em up to my specs. Their situation is such that they often need this type of disguise for themselves."

Air whistled darkly as the hopper slanted earthward. Denison reached an arm past Everard to point. "That's the palace. The royal bedchamber is over on the east side–"

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It was a heavier, less graceful building than its Persian successor in Pasargadae. Everard glimpsed a pair of winged bulls, cold white in an autumnal garden, left over from the Assyrians. He saw that the windows before him were too narrow for entrance, swore, and aimed at the nearest doorway. A pair of mounted sentries looked up, saw what was coming, and shrieked. Their horses reared, throwing them. Everard's machine splintered the door. One more miracle wasn't going to affect history, especially when such things were believed in as devoutly as vitamin pills at home, and possibly with more reason. Lamps guided him down a corridor where slaves and guards squalled their terror. At the royal bedroom, he drew his sword and knocked with the pommel. "Take over, Keith," he said. "You know the Median version of Aryan."

"Open, Astyages!" roared Denison. "Open to the messengers of Ahuramazda!"

Somewhat to Everard's surprise, the man within obeyed. Astyages was as brave as most of his people. But when the king—a thickset hard-faced person in early middle age—saw two beings, luminous robed, haloes around their heads and fountaining wings of light on their backs, seated on an iron throne in midair, he fell prostrate.

Everard heard Denison thunder in the best tent-meeting style, using a dialect he could not well follow:

"O infamous vessel of iniquity, heaven's anger is upon you! Do you believe that your least thought, though it skulk in the darkness which begot it, was ever hidden from the Day's Eye? Do you believe that almighty Ahuramazda would permit a deed so foul as the one you plot—"

Everard didn't listen. He strayed into his own thoughts: Harpagus was probably somewhere in this very city, full of his youth and unridden as yet by guilt. Now he would never bear that burden. He would never lay a child upon the mountain and lean on his spear as it cried and shivered and finally became still. He would revolt in the future, for his own reasons, and become the Chiliarch of Cyrus, but he would not die in his enemy's arms in a haunted forest; and a certain Persian, whose name Everard did not know, would also be spared a Greek sword and a slow falling into emptiness.

*Yet the memory of two men whom I killed is printed on my brain cells; there is a thin white scar on my leg; Keith Denison is forty-seven years old and has learned to think like a king.*

"—Know, Astyages, that this child Cyrus is favored of heaven. And heaven is merciful: you have been warned that if you stain your soul with his innocent blood, the sin can never be washed away.

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Leave Cyrus to grow up in Anshan, or burn forever with Ahriman! Mithras has spoken!"

Astyages groveled, beating his head on the floor.

"Let's go," said Denison in English.

Everard hopped to Persian hills, thirty-six years futureward. Moonlight fell upon cedars near a road and a stream. It was cold, and a wolf howled.

He landed the scooter, got off and began to remove his costume. Denison's bearded face came out of the mask, with strangeness written upon it. "I wonder," he said. His voice was nearly lost in the silence under the mountains. "I wonder if we didn't throw too much of a scare into Astyages. History does record that he gave Cyrus a three-year fight when the Persians revolted."

"We can always go back to the outbreak of the war and provide a vision encouraging him to resist," said Everard, fighting to be matter-of-fact; for there were ghosts around him. "But I don't believe that'll be necessary. He'll keep hands off the prince, but when a vassal rebels, well, he'll be mad enough to discount what by then will seem like a dream. Also, his own nobles, Median vested interests, would hardly allow him to give in. But let's check up. Doesn't the King lead a procession at the winter solstice festival?"

"Yeah. Let's go. Quickly."

And the sunlight burned around them, high above Pasargadae. They left their machine hidden and walked down on foot, two travelers among many streaming in to celebrate the Birthday of Mithras. On the way, they inquired what had happened, explaining that they had been long abroad. The answers satisfied them, even in small details which Denison's memories recorded but the chronicles hadn't mentioned.

At last they stood under a frosty-blue sky, among thousands of people, and salaamed when Cyrus the Great King rode past with his chief courtiers Kobad, Croesus, and Harpagus, and the pride and pomp and priesthood of Persia.

"He's younger than I was," whispered Denison. "He would be, I guess. And a little smaller . . . different face entirely, isn't it? . . . but he'll do."

"Want to stay for the fun?" asked Everard.

Denison drew his cloak around him. The air was bitter. "No," he said. "Let's go back. It's been a long time. Even if it never happened."

"Uh-huh." Everard seemed more grim than a victorious rescuer should be. "It never happened."

## X

Keith Denison left the elevator of a building in New York. He was

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vaguely surprised that he had not remembered what it looked like. He couldn't even recall his apartment number, but had to check with the directory. Details, details. He tried to stop trembling.

Cynthia opened the door as he reached it. "Keith," she said, almost wonderingly.

He could find no other words than: "Manse warned you about me, didn't he? He said he would."

"Yes. It doesn't matter. I didn't realize your looks would have changed that much. But it doesn't matter. Oh, my darling!"

She drew him inside, closed the door and crept into his arms.

He looked around the place. He had forgotten how cramped it was. And he had never liked her taste in decoration, though he had yielded to her.

The habit of giving in to a woman, even of asking her opinion, was one he'd have to learn all over again. It wasn't going to be easy.

She raised a wet face for his kiss. Was *that* how she looked? But he didn't remember—he didn't—After all that time, he had only remembered she was little and blonde. He had lived with her a few months; Cassandane had called him her morning star and given him three children and waited to do his will for fourteen years.

"Oh, Keith, welcome home," said the high small voice.

*Home!* he thought. *God!*

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# The Rosebud

*by Ray Russell*

OUTSIDE THE HOSPITAL, AN emergency ship took off, speeding a cargo of serum to a plague-ridden colony on the moon. Inside the hospital, Sam Geoffrion was saying, "I refuse to believe it, Dr. Shaw. It's—it's *unnatural.*"

"Unnatural? The little rosebud? Not at all."

Dr. Shaw shrugged. "Most natural thing in Creation. Call it Evolution. Call it Adaptability. What happened when the first men discovered they needed more dextrous hands to grip spears and sew hides? The opposable thumb appeared. They were hairy fellows, those first men, and the hair protected them from the cold; but when clothes were invented, the hair disappeared. Some time ago, around the middle of the Twentieth Century, scientists took the first step toward perfect reproduction of sound. Primitive as it now appears, it must have seemed miraculous to them—two microphones, two bands of grooves on a disc, a forked tone arm, two amplifiers, two speakers. The first system to match Man's own two ears. It was close to perfection. Understand? *Perfection.* Before too long, concerts—those quaint affairs where hundreds of people were packed together in uncomfortable auditoriums—became obsolete, because they were no better than the *perfect* stereophonic music that could be heard in one's own home. But the engineers kept on working, experimenting, refining, improving—even when their improvements became meaningless."

"Meaningless?"

"Yes—because Man was not equipped to *hear* the improvements: And then—today—old Mother Nature, the girl who gave us the opposable thumb and took away our ape fur, stepped into the picture again."

Dr. Shaw paused. "Now what about it, Sam? Do you still think it's *unnatural?*"

Geoffrion's voice was husky and low. "I don't know. I'd have to—see it."

Dr. Shaw flicked a switch on his desk and said: "Miss Crain, you may come in now." The door opened and a nurse entered, carrying a tiny, blanket-swathed bundle. "Ah," Dr. Shaw said. "Sam, have a peek at your first-born."

Geoffrion looked at the little red armful. A good-looking boy, he thought to himself. Resembled his wife a good deal. And, somehow, it didn't seem a freakish mistake of Nature's, but a refinement—and it was beautiful. It was just as Dr. Shaw had described it—blossoming from the infant forehead like a tiny rosebud: the third ear.



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# BOOKS

## The Innocence of Evil

### by Damon Knight

THE PLEASURE OF BEING HORRIFIED, moderately and for a fee, is a rather peculiar one. There's an analogy with the thrill of a roller-coaster ride—it's fun to be scared, when you know you can get off at the end of the line.

But people ride roller-coasters every summer; the horror business is not so dependable. There was a flood of horror films and stories during the 30s and early 40s; then nothing—and now, about ten years later, here it comes again.

Sniffing the trend, two veteran fantasy anthologists have recently produced horror collections: Groff Conklin, with BR-R-R-I (Avon, 35¢), and Donald A. Wollheim, with THE MACABRE READER (Ace, 35¢). A while ago, as you probably noticed, there was a brief but intense flurry of movie monster magazines.

All this raises a number of baffling questions. There's the riddle of horror's on-again off-again popularity, to which I'll come back later. There's the psychological puzzle of why it should be fun to be frightened at all; and there's the question, paramount from the writer's point of view:

How can you scare a reader with something that doesn't exist?

Put in this form, the question has a clear answer: You can't. If an imaginary monster doesn't correspond to something that already exists, if only in the reader's subconscious, obviously it isn't going to scare him.

For this reason, most of the stories in THE MACABRE READER strike me as tedious. They belong to the imitation-Poe school with its rococo style ("The malignant influence seemed to have departed the vicinity") and its conviction that the horrible must never be described, only hinted at. The reader's own imagination is supposed to fill in the gaps; but mine doesn't.



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Eight of the ten stories in BR-R-R-! don't scare me, either, although some of them are enjoyable in other ways.

But this hits me where I live:

*It crawled out of the darkness and hot damp mold into the cool of a morning. It was huge. It was lumped and crusted with its own hateful substances, and pieces of it dropped off as it went its way, dropped off and lay writhing, and stilled, and sank putrescent into the forest loam.* ("It," by Theodore Sturgeon.)

And so does this:

*There was silence, or as much silence as the jungle ever holds. My own throat went dry. And what I have said is insanity, but this is much worse. I felt Something waiting to see what I would do. It was, unquestionably, the most horrible sensation I had ever felt. I do not know how to describe it. What I felt was—not a personality, but a mind. I had a ghastly feeling that Something was looking at me from thousands of pairs of eyes, that it was all around me.*

*I shared, for an instant, what that Something saw and thought. I was surrounded by a mind which waited to see what I would do. It would act upon my action. But it was not a sophisticated mind. It was murderous, but innocent. It was merciless, but naive.* ("Doomsday Deferred," by Murray Leinster.)

Sturgeon's powerful story, from *Unknown*, exploits the shuddery old idea of growth in decay—worms in dead meat, flies in dunghills. "It walked unbreathing through the woods, and thought and saw and was hideous and strong, and it was not born and it did not live. It grew and moved about without living."

Here is the myth of anti-life that you see in the visionary paintings of Hieronymus Bosch—the dread of darkness and death, paradoxically animated by the squirming "aliveness" of carrion.

This irrationally compelling idea is built into our languages—the sentence "He is dead" contains it—and it lies at the root of nearly all our conceptions of the supernatural, from souls in heaven to vampires, ghosts, zombies and so on.

Curiously enough, these conventional figures are almost entirely missing from both collections. "Legal Rites," by Asimov and Pohl, in the Conklin book, is a ghost story, but is meant to be funny. Out of sixteen stories intended to be frightening (excluding three more of Conklin's choices, "Nursery Rhyme," by Charles Beaumont and "An Egyptian Hornet," by Algernon Blackwood, which are not even fantasy, and H. L. Gold's meant-to-be-funny "Warm, Dark Places"), two deal with corpses, one with a dug-up Norse god, and one, Roald Dahl's disturbing "The Sound

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Machine," with the suffering of plants. Four stories come under the heading of magical transformations or possessions (e.g., Idris Seabright's elegant "White Goddess"); and eight are stories about monsters.

Why monsters, especially? I think perhaps because the ghosts, zombies, vampires &c. of tradition are malevolent creatures: and for one reason or another we no longer take pure malevolence seriously.

A monster, in our tradition, is a creature at once horrible and pathetic. He's rounder, more believable than the magic-lantern figures of Victorian melodrama: we can shudder and sympathize at the same time.

"It was murderous, but innocent," says Leinster of his army-ant horror. And it's just this evil innocence, I think, which makes both his story and Sturgeon's so compelling.

Like Karloff's monster in FRANKENSTEIN, drowning a little girl among the water lilies, Sturgeon's monster is not malevolent, only intent, curious, interested, as it tears a living dog apart.

The shuddering pleasure of identifying with a monster in story or film is precisely the realization that it's a creature born out of nature, beyond good and evil: it can commit the most horrible acts and still be innocent.

But what need in us calls up these horrific images? And why should it lie apparently dormant for ten years?

Siegfried Krakauer's FROM CALIGARI TO HITLER, a study of the German film between wars, offers a disturbingly plausible theory. (It's a fascinating book, by the way. The Princeton University Press edition has been out of print for years, but Noonday Press has just published a paperback reprint at $1.95.)

In essence, Kracauer's thesis is the Jungian one that popular art forms reflect changes in the mass psyche. Thus, the grotesque and horrible films the Germans were making in the late 20s and early 30s are held to be precursors of the grotesque and horrible events they helped manufacture in the early 40s.

This belief goes all the way back to classical times and probably much further—the word "monster" itself is from the Latin *monstrum*, originally a divine omen of disaster. A monster in the classical sense is a creation out of the natural order—a grotesque combination, usually gigantic, of two or more different animals, e.g. the chimera, centaur, mermaid, &c. And we still shudder, I think with a classical anxiety, when we see the snake man in the sideshow.

What Kracauer is saying, of course, is not that the same Germans who made the films were responsible for the horrors of Belsen

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and Lidice, but rather that the film-makers expressed a wordless, universal sense of horror at what they all felt was coming.

For what the coincidence may be worth, the previous horror film-and-story cycle in America lasted from about 1930 to 1945. The present one has been under way for about five years. . . .

All this is of course pretty far-fetched, and you had better not believe any more of it than you can help.

## *Through Time And Space With Ferdinand Feghoot:* XVII

In August 3188, Ferdinand Feghoot saved Earth from a trans-temporal invasion by the Thutians, an uncouth race from the wrong side of the Coalsack.

Learning of their intentions, he presented himself at their Chief of Staff's office disguised as a Martian *mroof trader.* These persons having been everywhere, he was cordially welcomed. The Chief of Staff asked him at once whether Earth 1970 had anything better than primitive nuclear weapons.

Feghoot extruded his (synthetic) third-eye-stalk, as all Martians do when they want to be very impressive. "Earth-1970," he declared, "has the most terrible weapons ever developed. Its scientists take certain common, virtually harmless airborne germs, speed up their reproduction tremendously, concentrate them in fantastic numbers, and direct them at individuals and groups of the enemy, who are infallibly doomed."

The Chief of Staff turned very pale. "Wh-what do they call th-these abominable weapons?" he asked.

"Guided measles," whispered Ferdinand Feghoot.

—GRENDEL BRIARTON

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*Mahalia Thrip was the sort of social worker who was always terribly optimistic about her case. But she did not, regrettably, fully appreciate the special nature of Missus Avis's situation. . . .*

# EMPTY NEST

## by Kit Reed

"THE POOR DEAR," SAID Miss Mahalia Thrip. "The poor, poor, poorpoorpoor dear." Rocking forward on the toes of her multicolored sandals, she strained across the fence. "Are you lonely, dear?"

Prune-wrinkled, birdlike Missus Avis bent over the rich loam in her garden and ignored her. She jammed her sunhat down over her ears and grubbed disconsolately in the dirt.

"She's making a bad adjustment, poor thing," Mahalia Thrip told herself. "Ah well, on to work." Humming breezily, she rocked back on the heels of her multicolored sandals, gathered momentum and strode on.

Mahalia Thrip's multicolored sandals were her only concession to fashion. "A social worker," she always said, "must not attempt to dazzle her clients. People are less inclined to internalize their problems when they're talking to a person who is inconspicuously dressed." She wore a tan gabardine WAC uniform with the insignia ripped off and a white cotton blouse. She seldom took the jacket off because portions of her strained against the patch pockets of the cotton blouse and wiggled ominously when she walked. Indoors or out, she wore a dark green straw hat dead centered on her forehead. At dead center of the centered hat was a brown plastic scarab. Miss Thrip's clients, washed back by a tidal wave of words, had a way of staring at that scarab, transfixed, and Miss Thrip's own eyes were slightly crossed from trying to glance up at it when she thought no one else was looking.

That day Miss Thrip saw several families, but her heart and her thoughts were with Missus Avis.



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"I mean," she said at lunch, "that poor, poor dear is my own neighbor. If a worker can't help her own neighbor make a proper adjustment, she can't be very effective, can she?"

"How long's she lived near you?" the counterman said, swishing his rag at the far end of the lunch counter because he didn't really care about the answer.

"Oh, she's not the one who lives near *me*. I live near *her*. I mean, I just moved in yesterday, and my landlady told me who she was, and she looked so unhappy I just knew there must be something I could do. She looked so—so unassimilated, kneeling out there. You know," (she leaned across the counter earnestly) "old people have such a problem. This being ineffectual seems to get to them—they're old, and they think they're too old for a proper group experience. Why, all they have to do is find the right group!"

She bent over her carrot-and-raisin salad, sloshing her fork in her poached egg before she dug in. "Poor thing, I'll have to do something for her. I really will. I mean, I'd like to help her—I'd like to help her verbalize her problems, and then she'd be on the road to a busy life."

The counter man, who swished with his rag and stacked glasses and piled pieces of bread one on top of the other until there was nothing else to do, had come back to stand in front of his customer.

"You're wonderful to be interested in Missus Avis, young man," said Mahalia Thrip. "But perhaps you're unhappy too; perhaps there's something I—or my agency—could do for you. You know, we like to think people who are well adjusted socially will come to us, to look us over, you might say, just because we're there. You can get my check now, if you will. Young man!"

"Huh? Oh." He had been staring at the scarab.

That afternoon, when she stopped to give the Brintz family the monthly check, she found herself talking about her unhappy neighbor to Mrs. Brintz. With a start, she remembered herself and began again on the problems of Willie Brintz. "Now, if your boy had somebody he could make a real identification with, if he could . . ." Hypnotized, Mrs. Brintz watched the scarab and made no protest.

Hairy, sweaty, outspoken, outraged Brintz senior surged into the living room. "Whyn'cha shaddup, lady, and give us the dough?"

"You mean your—assistance?"

"Yeah. My ass—istance." Brintz cuffed his wife. "Quit sittin' around here listenin' to her gas, Myrtle. Get back to work."

"Oh, of course." Miss Thrip, meaty jaw thrust forward, stood

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toe to toe with Brintz. "Of course, you should realize, our counseling is three hundred times as important to you as any check." Brintz took a step forward. "Goodbye, Mr. Brintz. Goodbye, Mrs. Brintz. Remember what I said about Willie . . ."

Preoccupied with her sad-looking neighbor, Miss Thrip hardly listened as Wanda Wentworth spewed forth her troubles. They were the same troubles Wanda Wentworth had been masticating ("vocalizing," Miss Thrip corrected herself) for the past six years.

"Well, if you aren't gonna listen to me, when I'm tellin' you about this real new insight I got into me and my troubles, I'm gonna quit comin' to you and go to Family Service," Wanda Wentworth huffed. "Crumbum like you thinks you can set up your own social agency. I mean, I got plenty of people dyin' to listen to me. See this list?" (Miss Thrip hardly looked at the woman as she brought out a legal-sized piece of paper crammed with names; she was too preoccupied with Missus Avis.) "Well, these are all the people inna world who are conspirin' against me. An' if you don't wanna listen to me, I'm gonna put you on my list!"

"Um," Miss Thrip said. "Oh, of course, Wanda. That will be fine. Now if you'll try to give me the clarification on your problems a little better next time I see you, I think we'll really get somewhere. Goodbye."

Scarcely breathing hard, Miss Thrip breezed through two mother-in-law problems, one ruptured marriage, and a misplaced check, all with her mind fixed on quitting-time, when she could devote her credits in Soc. 101 and Abnormal Psychology 202 and her skilled mind and her ready understanding to the little old lady who grubbed in the garden next door to her new home.

"Good evening, my dear." As springy as she had been nine hours before, Miss Thrip opened the picket gate and bounced up the walk to see Missus Avis.

"Keep away from that door—please!" Busy in the dirt, Missus Avis looked up to deliver the plea. Then she went back to digging white, flaccid things out of the dirt and putting them in a tin can. They looked like worms.

"Going fishing?" Miss Thrip sank on her heavy haunches and began poking companionably at the dirt.

"No. N . . . no!" Missus Avis looked almost frightened.

"Well . . ." Miss Thrip blenched as her hand closed on something soft and squirmy. "Shall we sit on your steps and talk a minute?"

The old lady sighed. "If we got to."

"You—you looked so lonely, sit-

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ting out here in your yard, digging all day. I just wondered if you had enough to do."

"I got plenty to do. I got to dig."

"I mean—well, so many of our senior citizens find themselves with time on their hands. One mustn't feel one is unique just because one's hair has begun to run to silver." Miss Thrip giggled at the poetic turn of phrase.

"Hair always has been white. Been white ever since I got married. Don't bother me." Surreptitiously, the old lady let her hand drift off the steps into the dirt, in an automatic search for more worms.

"I don't think you understand, my dear. I mean, there are many people — your age — who simply haven't enough to do. Did you know that there are many organized recreations—really profitable group experiences—for you and others like you? You'd find your whole life enriched if you took the time to put your hand in mine and let me lead you to a happier pattern of group living." Miss Thrip sat back and basked in her eloquence.

"Can't take your hand." The old lady surveyed her fingers, encrusted with heavy loam. "Hands are too dirty."

"You know," Miss Thrip said coyly. "I think you're playing a little game with me. Perhaps I've started at this wrong. Perhaps we should discuss you and your problems. I mean, sometimes our life experiences are so great we find it impossible to verbalize our reactions, unless we are drawn out by experienced counsellors. Now, you say you are married?"

"Was."

"Your husband—passed away?"

"Might say that. He more sorta passed out." The old lady picked up her tin can and began rattling the worms in it. "Right out the window, 'sa matter of fact." She took out one worm that was undersized and threw it back in the dirt. "Just as well."

"I—ah—gather your life with him was not altogether happy?"

"It was diffrunt." Placidly the old lady clamped the tin can between her knees and began wiping her hands on her skirts. "I got to go in pretty quick."

"Do you — have any children? Perhaps you seem unhappy because you are having problems with your children. Adult children in the home can make many an ol—a senior citizen—feel uncomfortable and even superannuated." Miss Thrip felt she had scored.

"Kids don't live here. Got two—twins. Like to kill me, having 'em, but they're grown now, and I almost forgot how much it hurt."

"They no longer live here? Then perhaps you are alone because the little ones have flown away."

The old lady started and almost dropped her can of worms. "How'j you know?"

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"Oh, it's just a syndrome I know," Miss Thrip said with pride. "Tomorrow we'll talk some more, and when you see yourself and your problems in clearer relief, you won't mind coming out for a little recreation with others of your own kind."

"Oh, I couldn't do that." The old lady jumped to her feet, clutching the can of worms to her lean rib-cage. "I got to stay here."

"But why?"

"In case."

"In case?"

"Kids might come. They might come visit. You get outa here now, lady. They might even come tonight."

"I'll be back," Miss Thrip trilled, and she bounded away down the walk.

"You see, it's all perfectly simple," she told the counter man the next day. Her face was flushed with excitement, and her grizzled hair rippled across her pink skull in a new marcel she'd had just to impress the old lady. "It's the universal problem—one of the last life experiences, and one that is so hard for many a poor mother. The kiddies fly away, and all her mothering talent is wasted—it's all been lavished on them for years, and suddenly they are gone, and she has no place to give her bounty. She retreats into herself and refuses to seek happiness with others her own age." Rapt, Miss Thrip forgot even to break her poached egg. "You see, she still dreams that the kiddies are coming back, and until I can make her verbalize that dream—a sort of inner clarification is essential—she won't be able to lead a happy life without doing that. You see—" she leaned forward in a flash of brilliance— "she's waiting beside an empty nest."

Busily, she took out a notebook and scribbled a few sentences. Then she looked at the counter man. "Young man, I said check please!"

"Huh? Oh!" He had been staring at the scarab.

She fairly flew home. She plunged through the picket gate and drew up next to Missus Avis, who had a good day's collection of worms mounded in her tin can.

"Now, perhaps if we talk about it, my dear, you will see how silly it is for you to be spending your time here gardening, when you could be out empathizing with others your own age. "Oh . . ." she flapped her hands exasperatedly. "Can't you put down that dirt?"

"I got to dig."

"Well, if you must. Perhaps this is good therapy for you. Perhaps we could group therapize you. I'm sure there are plenty of garden clubs where you could find companionship and recreation . . ." Miss Thrip smoothed her hands

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over her gabardine skirt, trying not to notice that Missus Avis was regarding an extremely large worm with particular pride.

"I dig here."

"Ah . . . of course. Well, I was thinking, if you joined a garden club, perhaps you could learn to raise some really beautiful flowers here—things your children would be proud to see, if they should come back to visit their mamma."

"They ain't comin' back. I *hope* they ain't comin' back." Missus Avis had jumped to her feet in a shower of dirt and pale, plump worms. She looked skyward, shielding her head with her arms.

"But you said yesterday that they might come to visit!" Bewildered, Miss Thrip reached for her notebook. "Interesting reaction . . . must note this down . . ."

"Said they might come to visit." The old lady had settled in the dirt again. "Didn't say I wished they would. Hope they never do. Hope to hell they never do."

"Missus Avis!" Shocked, Mahalia Thrip mumbled to herself. A social worker must never make value judgments. Especially on some such integral thing as one's language or one's attitude. One's client is entitled to that attitude. "Oh, Missus Avis, perhaps if you told me about it, my dear . . ."

The old lady had begun to grub in the dirt again, picking up the dropped worms. Now, ignoring Mahalia Thrip's outstretched hand and her confidential, listening attitude, she picked up her can of worms and headed toward her front door. "I got to go in now."

"Perhaps I could come in with you. Often when a worker communicates with a client in her own surroundings, she finds her more at ease. Then you could verbalize . . ."

"I got to go in now. Alone. I got to get a box off to my kids."

"Well . . ." Before Miss Thrip had pocketed her notebook and tucked in the tail of her flimsy cotton blouse, the old lady had turned on her heel and slammed the front door behind her. Miss Thrip resisted the temptation to try the knob.

She had several more interviews in the old lady's garden. She brought enrollment blanks from the garden club and samples from a ceramics class and brochures from the Senior Citizens' Center. She contemplated bringing by an elderly rake from the Senior Citizens' Center, but reconsidered; it might bring back sad memories to the old lady. She sat through countless worm-digging sessions and retained her professional calm. "I got to dig," the old lady said. "I got to dig *here*."

"I can't seem to get close to her," she said to the dictaphone at the end of the week. "I—the case worker finds it difficult to

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approach the client, who fails to respond to approaches which have succeeded with many others, and refuses to tell all—or anything, for that matter. Perhaps the best solution would be for the worker to drop in unexpectedly, when the client is in her parlor, where she might be able, perhaps, to achieve a closer relationship because of the more intimate environment. Perhaps the only way to do that would be for the worker to go home unexpectedly, say, in the middle of the day, when the client might be in her home, eating lunch. Perhaps, if the worker went now . . ."

Miss Thrip gave herself the rest of the day off.

She took a cab right to the door of the old lady's house, she was so anxious to try her new plan. She paid the cab-driver and resisted an urge to vault the picket gate. Demurely, she swung it open and started up the walk.

The yard was deserted. The windows of the bungalow, a small one which couldn't contain more than one or two rooms and a kitchen, were covered from the inside. The old lady must be in her house. Tentatively, Miss Thrip tapped on the green front door. No answer. She tapped again, and still she heard nothing.

"Perhaps she has gone downtown to mail that package. Perhaps she isn't home at all!" Miss Thrip hummed to herself. "When she returns, she can find me on her living room couch, looking so natural and at home in her parlor that she won't be able to resist pouring out her whole life story."

Miss Thrip jiggled the handle. The door swung open and she planted one multicolored sandal firmly inside. The floor felt soft. "Hmm, deep-piled rugs," she thought. She moved inside and closed the door. It was dark and her eyes were dazzled by afterimages of the sun. She groped for a lightswitch and flinched as her hand touched something soft and muddy.

She shook her head and her eyes began to clear. She was surprised at the size of the room until she realized there were no inner walls in the house, and that there was only a single room and that the walls of this room were thatched with heavy twigs and daubed with mud and bits of string and had bottles and rocks and bright plastics studded in them like jewels and that the whole room smelled like fetid, feathered death. On the floor were bits of meat and crusts of bread and other pieces of filth that were soft and crawling beneath her feet. The mud-daubed walls made a close circle of the room, where only one spot was bare and clean. In it were a table and a rocking chair and a hammock. Beady-eyed and resentful, the old lady swung in the hammock.

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"I told you not to come in. I told you. Don't like my house, do you? Try to keep it just the way the kids left it. Have to. Too bad you don't like it."

"I . . ." Miss Thrip couldn't squeeze out another word.

"Warned you to stay outa here. Said the kids might come back." The old lady cackled. "Didn't think you'd like it—and besides, you better get out of here quick."

"I . . ." Miss Thrip squeaked. She groped for the door and found the handle slippery in her fingers.

"Yep. Told you. Oughta tell you this." The old lady leaned out of her hammock and grinned. "Heard from m'kids. Oldest boy says he's comin' around. Says he's been out courtin'. And you know how boys are when they come home. Always hungry."

"Ak!" Miss Thrip wrenched open the front door and almost tripped on an enormous feather.

She was halfway down the front walk before the shadowy, winged form plummeted down, screaming, to snatch her up.

"Son, son," Missus Avis croaked. "Mind your manners . . ." She ran in circles on the walk, waving her arms at the black blotch roaring toward the sky. "Share with your sister, son!" she screeched. She muttered to herself, kicked the worm can off the front stoop and went back into the empty nest.

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## Me

I think that I shall never see
A calculator made like me.
A me that likes Martinis dry
And on the rocks, a little rye.
A me that looks at girls and such,
But mostly girls, and very much.
A me that wears an overcoat
And likes a risky anecdote.
A me that taps a foot and grins
Whenever Dixieland begins.
They make computers for a fee,
But only moms can make a me.

—Hilbert Schenck, Jr.

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*Isaac Asimov's recent first straight mystery novel (*THE DOUBLE DEALERS, *Avon, 35¢) was not a completely new adventure for him—the good doctor has dealt with crime effectively and often in both long and short science fiction works. As he does in the following tale of a man with a Tom Sawyerish ambition and a negative wife.*

# OBITUARY

*by Isaac Asimov*

MY HUSBAND, LANCELOT, ALWAYS reads the paper at breakfast. What I see of him, when he first appears, is his lean, abstracted face, carrying its perpetual look of angry and slightly puzzled frustration. He doesn't greet me, and the newspaper, carefully unfolded in readiness for him, goes up before his face.

Thereafter, there is only his arm, emerging from behind the paper for a second cup of coffee into which I have carefully placed the necessary level teaspoonful of sugar—neither heaping nor deficient, under pain of a stinging glare.

I am no longer sorry for this. It makes for a quiet meal, at least.

However, on this morning, the quiet was broken when Lancelot barked out abruptly, "Good Lord! That fool, Paul Farber is dead. Stroke!"

I just barely recognized the name. Lancelot had mentioned him on occasion, so I knew him as a colleague; as another theoretical physicist. From my husband's exasperated epithet, I felt reasonably sure he was a moderately famous one who had achieved the success that had eluded Lancelot.

He put down the paper and stared at me angrily. "Why do they fill obituaries with such lying trash?" he demanded. "They make him out to be a second Einstein for no better reason than that he died of a stroke."

If there was one subject I had learned to avoid, it was that of obituaries. I dared not even nod agreement.

He threw down the paper and walked away and out the room, leaving his eggs half-finished and his second cup of coffee untouched.

I sighed. What else could I do? What else could I ever do?



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Of course, my husband's name isn't really Lancelot Stebbins, because I am changing names and circumstances, as far as I can, to protect the guilty. However, the point is that even if I used real names you would not recognize my husband.

Lancelot had a talent in that respect; a talent for being passed over, for going unnoticed. His discoveries are invariably anticipated, or blurred by a greater discovery made simultaneously. At scientific conventions, his papers are poorly attended because another paper of greater importance is being given in another section.

Naturally, this has had its effect on him. It has changed him.

When I first married him, twenty-five years ago, he was a sparkling catch. He was well-to-do through inheritance and already a trained physicist with intense ambition and great promise. As for myself, I believe I was pretty then, but that did not last. What did last was my introversion and my failure to be the kind of social success an ambitious young faculty-member needs for a wife.

Perhaps that was part of Lancelot's talent for going unnoticed. Had he married another kind of wife, she might have made him visible in her radiation.

Did he realize that himself after a while? Was that why he grew away from me after the first two or three reasonably happy years? Sometimes I believed this and bitterly blamed myself.

But then I would think it was only his thirst for fame, which grew for being unslaked. He left his position on the faculty and built a laboratory of his own far outside town, for the sake, he said, of cheap land and of isolation.

Money was no problem. In his field, the government was generous with its grants and those he could always get. On top of that, he used our own money without limit.

I tried to withstand him. I said, "But it's not necessary, Lancelot. It's not as though we have financial worries. It's not as though they're not willing to let you remain on the university staff. All I want are children and a normal life."

But there was a burning inside him that blinded him to everything else. He turned angrily on me. "There is something that must come first. The world of science must recognize me for what I am; for a—a—great investigator."

At that time, he still hesitated to apply the term, genius, to himself.

It didn't help. The fall of chance remained always and perpetually against him. His laboratory hummed with work; he hired assistants at excellent salaries; he drove himself roughly and pitilessly. Nothing came of it.

I kept hoping he would give up someday; return to the city; allow us to lead a normal, quiet life. I

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waited, but always when he might have admitted defeat, some new battle would be taken up, some new attempt to storm the bastions of fame. Each time he charged with such hope and fell back in such despair.

And always he turned on me; for if he was ground down by the world, he could always grind me in return. I am not a brave person, but I was coming to believe I must leave him.

And yet—

In this last year he had obviously been girding himself for another battle. A last one. I thought. There was something about him more intense, more a-quiver that I had ever seen before. There was the way he murmured to himself and laughed briefly at nothing. There were the times he went for days without food and nights without sleep. He even took to keeping laboratory notebooks in a bedroom safe as though he feared his own assistants.

Of course I was fatalistically certain that this attempt of his would fail, also. But surely, if it failed, then at his age, he would have to recognize that his last chance had gone. Surely he would have to give up.

So I decided to wait, as patiently as I could.

But the affair of the obituary at breakfast came as something of a jolt. Once, on an earlier occasion of the sort, I had remarked that at least he could count on a certain amount of recognition in his own obituary.

I suppose it wasn't a very clever remark, but then my remarks never are. I had meant it to be lighthearted, to pull him out of a gathering depression during which I knew, from experience, he would be most intolerable.

And perhaps there had been a little unconscious spite in it, too. I cannot honestly say.

At any rate, he turned full on me. His lean body shook and his dark eyebrows pulled down over his deep-set eyes as he shrieked at me in falsetto, "But I'll never read my obituary. I'll be deprived even of that."

And he spat at me. He deliberately spat at me.

I ran to my bedroom.

He never apologized, but after a few days in which I avoided him completely, we carried on our frigid life as before. Neither of us ever referred to the incident during that time.

Now there was another obituary.

Somehow, as I sat there alone at the breakfast table, I felt it to the last straw for him; the climax of his long-drawn-out failure.

I could sense a crisis coming and didn't know whether to fear or welcome it. Perhaps, on the whole, I would welcome it. Any change could not fail to be a change for the better. . . .

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Shortly before lunch, he came upon me in the living room, where a basket of unimportant sewing gave my hands something to do and a bit of television occupied my mind.

He said, abruptly, "I will need your help."

It had been twenty years or more since he had said anything like that and, involuntarily, I thawed toward him. He looked unhealthily excited. There was a flush on his ordinarily pale cheeks.

I said, "Gladly, if there's something I can do."

"There is. I have given my assistants a month's vacation. They will leave Saturday and after that you and I will work alone in the laboratory. I tell you now so that you refrain from making any other arrangements for the coming week."

I shrivelled a bit. "But Lancelot, you know I can't help you with your work. I don't understand—"

"I know that," he said, with complete contempt. "But you don't have to understand my work. You need only follow a few simple instructions and follow them carefully. The point is that I have discovered something, finally, which will put me where I belong—"

"Oh, Lancelot," I said, involuntarily, for I had heard this before a number of times.

"Listen to me, you fool, and for once try to behave like an adult. This time I have done it. No one can anticipate me this time because my discovery is based on such an unorthodox concept that no physicist alive, but myself, is genius enough to think of it—not for a generation at least. And when my work bursts on the world, I could be recognized as the greatest name of all time in science."

"I'm sure I'm very glad for you, Lancelot."

"I said I *could* be recognized. I could not be, also. There is a great deal of injustice in the assignment of scientific credit. I've learned that often enough. So it will not be enough merely to announce the discovery. If I do, everyone will crowd into the field and after a while, I'll just be a name in the history books, with glory spread out over a number of Johnny-come-latelies."

I think the only reason he was talking to me then, three days before he could get to work on whatever it was he planned to do was that he could no longer contain himself. He bubbled over and I was the only one who was nonentity enough to be witness to that.

He said, "I intend my discovery to be so dramatized, to break on mankind with so thunderous a clap, that there will be no room for anyone else to be mentioned in the same breath with me, ever."

He was going too far, and I was afraid of the effect of another disappointment on him. Might it not drive him mad? I said, "But Lance-

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lot, why need we bother? Why don't we leave all this? Why not take a long vacation? You have worked hard enough and long enough, Lancelot. Perhaps we can take a trip to Europe. I've always wanted to—"

He stamped his foot. "*Will* you stop your foolish meowing? Saturday, you will come into my laboratory with me."

I slept poorly for the next three nights. He had never been quite like this before, I thought; never quite as bad. Might he not be mad already, perhaps?

It could be madness now, I thought, a madness born of disappointment no longer endurable, and sparked by the obituary. He had never allowed me in the laboratory before. Surely he meant to do something to me, to make me the subject of some insane experiment, or to kill me outright.

They were miserable, frightened nights.

But then morning would come and I would think, surely, he wasn't mad; surely, he wouldn't offer me violence. Even the spitting incident was not truly violent and he had never actually tried to hurt me physically.

So in the end I waited, and on Saturday I walked to what might be my death as meekly as a chicken. Together, silently, we walked down the path that led from our dwelling to the laboratory.

The laboratory was frightening just in itself, and I stepped about gingerly, but Lancelot only said, "Oh, stop staring about you as though something were going to hurt you. You just do as I say and look where I tell you."

"Yes, Lancelot." He had led me into a small room, the door of which had been padlocked. It was almost choked with objects of very strange appearance and with a great deal of wiring.

Lancelot said, "To begin with, do you see this iron crucible?"

"Yes, Lancelot." It was a small but deep container made out of thick metal and rusted in spots on the outside. It was covered by a coarse wire netting.

He urged me toward it and I saw that inside it was a white mouse with its front paws up on the inner side of the crucible and its small snout at the wire netting in quivering curiosity, or perhaps in anxiety. I am afraid I jumped, for to see a mouse without expecting to is startling, at least to me.

Lancelot growled, "It won't hurt you. Now just back against the wall and watch me."

My fears returned most forcefully. I grew horribly certain that from somewhere a lightning bolt would shoot out and incinerate me or some monstrous thing of metal might emerge and crush me; or—or—

I closed my eyes.

But nothing happened; to me,

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at least. I heard only a *ph-f-ft,* as though a small firecracker had misfired, and Lancelot said to me, "Well?"

I opened my eyes. He was looking at me, fairly shining with pride. I stared blankly.

He said, "Here, don't you see it, you idiot? Right here."

A foot to one side of the crucible was a second one. I hadn't seen him put it there.

"Do you mean this second crucible?" I asked.

"It isn't quite a second crucible, but a duplicate of the first crucible. For all ordinary purposes, they are the same crucible, atom for atom. Compare them. You'll find the rust marks identical."

"You made the second one out of the first?"

"Yes, but in a special way. To create matter would require a prohibitive amount of energy, ordinarily. It would take the complete fission of a hundred grams of uranium to create one gram of duplicate matter, even granting perfect efficiency. The great secret I have stumbled on is that the duplication of an object at a point in future time requires very little energy if that energy is applied correctly. The essence of the feat, my—my dear, in my creating such a duplicate and bringing it back, is that I have accomplished the equivalent of time-travel."

It was the measure of his triumph and happiness that he actually used an affectionate term in speaking to me.

"Isn't that remarkable?" I said, for to tell the truth, I *was* impressed. "Did the mouse come, too?"

I looked inside the second crucible as I asked that and got another nasty shock. It contained a white mouse; a dead white mouse.

Lancelot turned faintly pink. "That is a shortcoming. I can bring back living matter, but not as living matter. It comes back dead."

"Oh, what a shame. Why?"

"I don't know yet. I imagine the duplications are completely perfect on the atomic scale. Certainly, there is no visible damage. Dissections show nothing wrong."

"You might ask—" I stopped myself quickly as he glanced at me. I decided I had better not suggest a collaboration of any sort, for I knew from experience that in that case the collaborator would invariably get all the credit for the discovery.

Lancelot said, with sour amusement, "I *have* asked. A trained biologist has performed autopsies on some of my animals and found nothing. Of course, they didn't know where the animal came from and I took care to take it back before anything would happen to give it away. Lord, even my assistants don't know what I've been doing."

"But why must you keep it so secret."

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"Just because I can't bring object back alive. Some subtle molecular derangement. If I published my results, someone else might learn the method of preventing such derangement, add his slight improvement to my basic discovery, and achieve a greater fame, because he would bring back a living man who might give information about the future."

I saw that quite well. Nor need he say it "might" be done. It would be done. Inevitably. In fact, no matter what he did, he would lose the credit. I was sure of it.

"However," he went on, more to himself, than to me, "I can wait no longer. I must announce this, but in such a way that it will be indelibly and permanently associated with me. There must be a drama about it so effective that thereafter there will be no way of mentioning time travel without mentioning me, no matter what other men may do in the future. I am going to prepare that drama and you will play a part in it."

"But what do you want me to do, Lancelot?"

"You'll be my widow."

I clutched at his arm. "Lancelot, do you mean—" I cannot quite analyze the conflicting feelings that upset me at that moment.

He disengaged himself roughly. 'Only temporarily. I am not committing suicide. I am simply going to bring myself back from three days in the future."

"But you'll be dead, then."

"Only the 'me' that is brought back. The real 'me' will be as alive as ever. Like that mouse." His eyes shifted to a dial and he said. "Ah. Zero time in a few seconds. Watch the second crucible and the dead mouse."

Before my eyes, it disappeared and there was a *ph-f-ft* sound again.

"Where did it go?"

"Nowhere," said Lancelot. "It was only a duplicate. The moment we passed that instant in time at which the duplicate was formed, it naturally disappeared. It was the first mouse that was the original, and it remains, alive and well. The same will be true of me. A duplicate 'me' will come back dead. The original 'me' will be alive. After three days, we will come to the instant at which the duplicate 'me' was formed, using the real 'me' as a model, and sent back dead. Once we pass that instant the dead duplicate 'me' will disappear and the live 'me' will remain. Is that clear?"

"It sounds dangerous."

"It isn't. Once my dead body appears, the doctor will pronounce me dead, the newspapers will report me dead, the undertaker will prepare to bury the dead. I will then return to life and announce how I did it. When that happens, I will be more than the discoverer of time travel; I will be the man who came back from the dead.

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Time-travel and Lancelot Stebbins will be publicized so thoroughly and so intermingled, that nothing will extricate my name from the thought of time-travel ever again."

"Lancelot," I said softly, "why can't we just announce your discovery. This is too elaborate a plan. A simple announcement will make you famous enough and then we can move to the city perhaps—"

"*Quiet!* You will do what I say."

I don't know how long Lancelot was thinking of all this before the obituary actually brought matters to a head. Of course, I don't minimize his intelligence. Despite his phenomenally bad luck, there is no questioning his brilliance.

He had informed his assistants before they had left of the experiments he intended to conduct while they were gone. Once they testified it would seem quite natural that he should be bent over a particular set of reacting chemicals and that he should be dead of cyanide poisoning.

"So you see to it that the police get in touch with my assistants at once. You know where they can be reached. I want no hint of murder or suicide, or anything but accident, natural and logical accident. I want a quick death certificate from the doctor, a quick notification to the newspapers."

I said, "But Lancelot, what if they find the real you?"

"Why should they?" he snapped "If you find a corpse, do you start searching for the living replica, also? No one will look for me and I will stay quietly in the temporal chamber for the interval. There are toilet facilities and I can bring in enough sandwich fixings to keep me."

He added regretfully, "I'll have to make do without coffee, though, till it's over. I can't have anyone smelling unexplained coffee here while I'm supposed to be dead. . . . Well, there's plenty of water and it's only three days."

I clasped my hands nervously and said, "Even if they do find you won't it be the same thing anyway? There'll be a dead 'you' and a living 'you'—" It was myself I was trying to console; myself I was trying to prepare for the inevitable disappointment.

But he turned on me, shouting. "No, it won't be the same thing at all. It will all become a hoax that failed. I'll be famous, but only as a fool."

"But Lancelot," I said, cautiously, "something always goes wrong."

"Not this time."

"But you always say 'not this time,' and yet something *always* —"

He was white with rage and his irises showed clear all about their circle. He caught my elbow and hurt it terribly but I dared not cry out. He said, "Only one thing can

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go wrong, and that is *you*. If you give it away, if you don't play your part perfectly, if you don't follow the instructions exactly, I—I—" He seemed to cast about for a punishment. "I'll *kill* you."

I turned my head away in sheer terror and tried to break loose, but he held on grimly. It was remarkable how strong he could be when he was in a passion. He said, "Listen to me! You have done me a great deal of harm by being you, but I have blamed myself for marrying you in the first place and for never finding the time to divorce you in the second. But now I have my chance, despite you, to turn my life into a vast success. If you spoil even that chance, I will kill you. I mean that literally."

I was sure he did. "I'll do everything you say," I whispered, and he let me go.

He spent a day on his machinery. "I've never transported more than a hundred grams before," he said, calmly thoughtful.

I thought: *It won't work. How can it?*

The next day, he adjusted the device to the point where I needed only to close one switch. He made me practice that particular switch on a dead circuit for what seemed an interminable time.

"Do you understand now? Do you see exactly how it is done?"

"Yes."

"Then do it, when this light flashes and not a moment before."

*It won't work,* I thought. "Yes," I said.

He took his position and remained in stolid silence. He was wearing a rubber apron over a laboratory jacket.

The light flashed, and the practice turned out to be worthwhile for I pulled the switch automatically before thought could stop me or even make me waver.

For an instant, there were two Lancelots before me, side by side, the new one dressed as the old one, but more rumpled. And then the new one collapsed and lay still.

"All right," cried the living Lancelot, stepping off the carefully marked spot. "Help me. Grab his legs."

I marvelled at Lancelot. How, without wincing or showing any uneasiness, could he carry his own dead body, his own body of three days in the future? Yet he held it under its arms without showing any more emotion than if it had been a sack of wheat.

I held it by the ankles, my stomach turning at the touch. It was still blood-warm to the touch; freshly dead. Together we carried it through a corridor and up a flight of stairs, down another corridor and into a room. Lancelot had it already arranged. A solution was bubbling in a queer all-glass contraption inside a closed section, with a movable glass door partitioning it off.

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Other chemical equipment was scattered about, calculated, no doubt, to show an experiment in progress. A bottle, boldly labelled "Potassium cyanide" was on the desk, prominent among the others. There was a small scattering of crystals on the desk near it; cyanide, I presume.

Carefully, Lancelot crumpled the dead body as though it had fallen off the stool. He placed crystals on the body's left hand and more on the rubber apron; finally, a few on the body's chin.

"They'll get the idea," he muttered.

A last look-around and he said, "All right. Go back to the house now and call the doctor. Your story is that you came here to bring me a sandwich because I was working through lunch. There it is." And he showed me a broken dish and a scattered sandwich where, presumably, I had dropped it. "Do a little screaming, but don't overdo it."

It was not difficult for me to scream when the time came, or to weep. I had felt like doing both for days, and now it was a relief to let the hysteria out.

The doctor behaved precisely as Lancelot had said he would. The bottle of cyanide was virtually the first thing he saw. He frowned. "Dear me, Mrs. Stebbins, he was a careless chemist."

"I suppose so," I said, sobbing. "He shouldn't have been working himself, but both his assistants are on vacation."

"When a man treats cyanide as though it were salt, it's bad." The doctor shook his head in grave moralistic fashion. "Now, Mrs. Stebbins, I will have to call the police. It's accidental cyanide poisoning, but it's a violent death and the police—"

"Oh, yes, yes, call them." And then I could almost have beaten myself for having sounded suspiciously eager.

The police came, and along with them a police surgeon, who grunted in disgust at the cyanide crystals on hand, apron, and chin. The police were thoroughly disinterested, asked only statistical questions concerning names and ages. They asked if I could manage the funeral arrangements. I said yes, and they left.

I then called the newspapers, and two of the press associations. I said I thought they would be picking up news of the death from the police records and I hoped they would not stress the fact that my husband was a careless chemist, with the tone of one who hoped nothing ill would be said of the dead. After all, I went on, he was a nuclear physicist rather than a chemist and I had a feeling lately he might be in some sort of trouble.

I followed Lancelot's line exactly in this, and it worked. A nuclear

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physicist in trouble? Spies? Soviet agents?

The reporters began to come eagerly. I gave them a youthful portrait of Lancelot and a photographer took pictures of the laboratory building. I took them through a few rooms of the main laboratory for more pictures. No one, neither the police nor the reporters, asked questions about the bolted room or even seemed to notice it.

I gave them a mass of professional and biographical material that Lancelot had made ready for me, and told several anecdotes designed to show a combination of humanity and brilliance. In everything I tried to be letter-perfect and yet I could feel no confidence. Something would go wrong; *something* would go wrong.

And when it did, I knew he would blame me. And this time, he had promised to kill me.

The next day I brought him the newspapers. Over and over again, he read them, eyes glittering. He had made a full box on the lower left of the New York *Times*' front page. The *Times* played down the mystery of his death and so did the A.P., but one of the tabloids had a front page headline: ATOM SAVANT IN MYSTERY DEATH.

He laughed aloud as he read that, and when he completed all of them, he turned back to the first.

He looked up at me sharply. "Don't go. Listen to what they say."

"I've read them already, Lancelot."

"Listen, I tell you."

He read every one aloud to me, lingering on their praises of the dead, then said to me, aglow with self-satisfaction, "Do you still think something will go wrong?"

I said hesitantly, "If the police come back to ask why I thought you were in trouble—"

"You were vague enough. Tell them you had had bad dreams. By the time they decide to push investigations further, if they do, it will be too late."

To be sure, everything was working, but I could not hope that all would continue so. And yet the human mind is odd; it will persist in hoping even when it cannot hope.

I said, "Lancelot, when this is all over and you are famous, really famous—then after that, surely you can retire. We can go back to the city and live quietly."

"You are an imbecile. Don't you see that once I am recognized, I *must* continue. Young men will flock to me. This laboratory will become a great Institution of Temporal Investigation. I'll become a legend in my lifetime. I will pile my greatness so high that no one afterward will ever be able to be anything but an intellectual dwarf compared to me—" He raised him-

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self on tip-toes, eyes shining, as though he already saw the pedestal onto which he would be raised.

It had been my last hope of some personal shreds of happiness, and a small one. I sighed.

I asked the undertaker that the body be allowed to remain in its coffin in the laboratories before burial in the Stebbins family plot on Long Island. I asked that it remain unenbalmed, offering to keep it in a large refrigerated room with the temperature set at 40. I asked that it not be removed to the funeral home.

The undertaker brought the coffin to the laboratory in frigid disapproval. No doubt this was reflected in the eventual bill. My offered explanation that I wanted him near me for a last period of time and that I wanted his assistants given a chance to view the body was lame and sounded lame.

Still, Lancelot had been most specific in what I was to say.

Once the dead body was laid out, with the coffin lid still open, I went to see Lancelot.

"Lancelot," I said, "the undertaker was quite displeased. I think he suspects that something odd is going on."

"Good," said Lancelot, with satisfaction.

"But—"

"We need wait only one more day. Nothing will be brought to a head out of mere suspicion before then. Tomorrow morning the body will disappear. Or should."

"You mean it might not?" *I knew it; I knew it.*

"There could be some delay, or some prematurity. I have never transported anything this heavy and I'm not certain how exactly my equations hold. To make the necessary observation is one reason I want the body here and not in a funeral parlor."

"But in the funeral parlor it would disappear before witnesses."

"And here you think they will suspect trickery?"

"Of course."

He seemed amused. "They will say: Why did he send his assistants away? Why did he run experiments himself that any child could perform and yet manage to kill himself running them? Why did the dead body happen to disappear without witnesses? They will say: There is nothing to this absurd story of time-travel. He took drugs to throw himself in a cataleptic trance and doctors were hoodwinked."

"Yes," I said, faintly. How did he come to understand all that?

"And," he went on," when I continue to insist I have solved time-travel and that I was indisputably pronounced dead and am now indisputably alive, orthodox scientists will heatedly denounce me as a fraud. Why, in one week, I will have become a household name to

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every man on Earth. They will talk of nothing else. I will offer to make a demonstration of time-travel before any group of scientists who wish to see it. I will offer to make the demonstration on an intercontinental TV circuit. Public pressure will force scientists to attend, and the networks to give permission. It doesn't matter whether people will watch hoping for a miracle or for a lynching. They will watch! And *then* I will succeed, and who in science will ever have had a more transcendent climax to his life?"

I was dazzled for a moment, but something was unmoved within me, something said: Too long, too complicated; something will go wrong.

That evening, his assistants arrived, and tried to be respectfully grieving in the presence of the corpse. Two more witnesses to swear they had seen Lancelot dead; two more witnesses to confuse the issue and help build events to their stratospheric peak.

By four the next morning, we were in the cold-room, bundled in overcoats and waiting for zero moment.

Lancelot, in high excitement, kept checking his instruments and doing I-know-not-what with them. His desk computer was working constantly, though how he could make his cold fingers jiggle the keys so nimbly, I am at a loss to say.

I, myself, was quite miserable. There was the cold, the dead body in the coffin, the uncertainty of the future.

We had been there for what seemed an eternity, and finally Lancelot said, "It will work. It will work as predicted. At the most, disappearance will be five minutes late, and this when 70 kilograms of mass are involved. My analysis of chronous forces is masterly indeed." He smiled at me, but he also smiled at his own corpse with equal warmth.

I noticed that his lab jacket, which he had been wearing constantly for three days now, sleeping in it I am certain, had become wrinkled and shabby. It was about as it had seemed upon the second Lancelot, the dead one, when it had appeared.

Lancelot seemed to be aware of my thoughts, or perhaps only of my gaze, for he looked down at his jacket and said, "Ah, yes, I had better put on the rubber apron. My second self was wearing it when it appeared."

"What if you didn't put it on?" I asked tonelessly.

"I would have to. It would be a necessity. Something would have reminded me. Else *it* would not have appeared in one." His eyes narrowed as he tied the apron strings. "Do you still think something will go wrong?"

"I don't know," I mumbled.

"Do you think the body won't

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disappear or that I'll disappear instead."

When I didn't answer at all, he said in a half-scream, "Can't you see my luck has changed at last? Can't you see how smoothly and according to plan it is all working out? I will be the greatest man who ever lived. . . . Come, heat up the water for the coffee." He was suddenly calm again. "It will serve as celebration when my double leaves us and I return to life. I haven't had any coffee for three days."

It was only instant coffee he pushed in my direction, but after three days that, too, would serve. I fumbled at the laboratory hotplate with my cold fingers until Lancelot pushed me roughly to one side and set a beaker of water upon it.

"It'll take a while," he said, turning the control to 'high.' He looked at his watch then at various dials on the wall. "My double will be gone before the water boils. Come here and watch." He stepped to the side of the coffin.

I hesitated. "Come," he said, peremptorily.

I came.

He looked down at himself with infinite pleasure and waited. We both waited, staring at a corpse.

There was the *ph-f-f-t* sound and Lancelot cried out, "Less than two minutes off."

Without a blur or a wink, the dead body was gone.

The open coffin contained an empty set of clothes. The clothes, of course, had not been those in which the dead body had been brought back. They were real clothes and they stayed in reality. There they now were: underwear within shirt and pants; shirt within tie; tie within jacket. Shoes had turned over, dangling socks from within them. The body was gone.

I could hear water boiling.

"Coffee," said Lancelot. "Coffee first. Then we call the police and the newspapers."

I made the coffee for him and myself. I gave him the usual level teaspoon from the sugar bowl, neither heaping nor deficient. Even under these conditions, when I was sure that for once it wouldn't matter to him, habit was strong.

I sipped at my coffee, which I drank without cream or sugar, as was my habit. Its warmth was most welcome.

He stirred his coffee. "All," he said, softly. "All I have waited for. He put the cup to his grimly triumphant lips and drank.

Those were his last words.

Now that it was over, there was a kind of frenzy in me. I managed to strip him and dress him in the clothing from the coffin. Somehow I was able to heave his weight upward and place him in the coffin. I folded his arms across his chest as they had been.

I then washed out every trace of

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coffee in the sink in the room outside, and the sugar-bowl, too. Over and over again I rinsed, until all the cyanide, which I had substituted for the sugar, was gone.

I carried his laboratory jacket and other clothes to the hamper where I had stored those the double had brought back. The second set had disappeared, of course, and I put the first set there.

Next I waited.

By that evening, I was sure the corpse was cold enough, and called the undertakers. Why should they wonder? They expected a dead body and there was the dead body. The same dead body. Really the same body. It even had cyanide in it as the first was supposed to have.

I suppose they might still be able to tell the difference between a body dead twelve hours and one dead three and a half days, even under refrigeration—but why should they dream of looking?

They didn't. They nailed down the coffin, took him away and buried him. It was the perfect murder.

As a matter of fact, since Lancelot was legally dead at the time I killed him, I wonder if, strictly speaking, it was murder at all. Of course, I don't intend to ask a lawyer about this.

Life is quiet for me now; peaceful and contented. I have money enough. I attend the theater. I have made friends.

And I live without remorse. To be sure, Lancelot will never receive credit for time-travel. Someday when time-travel is discovered again, the name of Lancelot Stebbins will rest in Stygian unrecognized darkness. But then, I told him that whatever his plans, he would end without the credit. If I hadn't killed him, something else would have spoiled things, and then he would have killed me.

No, I live without remorse.

In fact, I have forgiven Lancelot everything; everything but that moment when he spat at me. So it is rather ironic that he did have one happy moment before he died, for he was given a gift few could have, and he, above all men, savored it.

Despite his bitter words that time he spat at me, Lancelot did manage to read his own obituary.

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*As Commiczar of Brimstone Production & Stenches, Ashmadai rated a private office—which was essential to his daring, forbidden plan to summon up a human . . .*

# PACT

*by Winston P. Sanders*

How Ashmadai came to decide, in the teeth of all modern skeptical science, that certain ancient legends were sober truth; and how he then quested for the book he must have, and finally succeeded: would make a story in itself. But not our story.

A longer time passed before he had assembled the needful ingredients, not to mention the needful courage. At last, on a certain hour, he rang for his secretary. She came hopping in and bellowed, "Yes, sir?"

"I have an urgent job on hand," said Ashmadai. "I am not to be disturbed by anything, for any reason whatsoever, until I tell you otherwise. Is that clear?" He was pleased, and a little surprised, by his own calm tones.

"Yes, sir," nodded the secretary. "No inter'erence. Unless His In'ernal 'a'esty calls." Her fangs, though impressive, hampered her diction; so of course her one desire was to go on the stage.

"Indeed," said Ashmadai sarcastically. "Or unless Armageddon is declared. Now get out there and guard my privacy!"

The secretary groveled and hopped away again. Ashmadai glided from behind the obsidian desk to the door, which he locked. Returning to the windows, he made sure that no one was flying past or peering in. Not that it had been likely. As Commiczar of Brimstone Production & Stenches, Ashmadai rated an office in the third-from-lowest subbasement of the Hotiron Building. Only the most exclusive traffic was allowed in these lanes. All that he saw was the usual great hollow vista, touched here and there with flamelight. Perceptions sharpened by excitement, he slanted his ears forward as a loud and clear shriek of agony rose above the general



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hubbub. "A Flat," he nodded, and gestured the windows to close their lids.

Allowing himself no time to become frightened, he opened a drawer. The moldering old folio, bound in dragon skin, came out first. He laid it on his desk and checked the ritual once more while he assembled paraphernalia. And then to work.

The first item of procedure was painful but not unendurable, reciting the Lord's Prayer sideways. What followed was so ghastly that Ashmadai, having completed it, went through everything else in a mercifully numb state. But by the time he had chalked the Möbius strip on the three-dimensional floor, he was recovering, and he cried the final *"Venite, venite, venite!"* on an almost arrogant note.

There was a brilliant, soundless flash. When Ashmadai could see again, a man stood within the diagram.

Ashmadai crouched back. He had expected the formula to work. But the actuality— He found himself shaking, lit a cigar and puffed hard. Only then could he face the one he had summoned.

Even by Ashmadai's standards (he considered himself a handsome devil) the man was not acutely nauseating. He was about the same size, also bifurcate though lacking horns, wings, or tail. He was in his shabby shirtsleeves, but gave no impression of poverty. An aged specimen, Ashmadai saw, lean and bald, with skin like crumpled parchment. So what made him so terrible? After a moment, Ashmadai decided it was the eyes. Behind the thick-lensed glasses, they crackled with a more than common intensity. And behind them was a soul. . . . Ashmadai fought down the ancient envious hunger.

The man scuttled about for a while, trying to get out of the Möbius strip but failing. (The book warned of unspeakable consequences if a human, summoned, should escape before a covenant had been arrived at.) But presently the being calmed himself. He stood with folded arms and stiff lips, peering into the flickerlit murk around him.

When he saw Ashmadai, he nodded. "I hadn't believed that nonsense," he said, with an oldster's parched chuckle. "But I am not dreaming. There is far too much detail; and, also, once I have realized that I am dreaming, I always awaken. Therefore, common sense must give way to fact. Are they really saucer shaped?"

Ashmadai gaped. "What?"

"Your spaceships."

"Spaceships?" Ashmadai thumbed mentally through all the human languages of all the ages, searching for the concept. "Oh, I see. I don't have a spaceship."

"No? Well, what do you use,

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then? A, ah, hyperspatial tube, I believe the current fantasy term is?" The man gagged. "I'm well aware that that is a mathematically meaningless noise. But I take it you had some method of transporting me to your planet."

"Planet? I haven't any planet," said Ashmadai, more bewildered than ever. "I mean, well, after all, I date back to the Beginning, when there weren't any planets to be born under. Not even a Zodiac."

"Just a minute!" bristled the man, as nearly as a hairless person can bristle. "I may belong to a species technologically behind your own, but you needn't insult my intelligence. We have established that the universe was created at least five billion years ago."

"8,753,271,413," nodded Ashmadai slowly.

"What? Well, then, do you mean to stand there and make the preposterous claim that you are of equal age? Why, the mnemonic problem alone invalidates the assertion—"

"Whoa!" exclaimed Ashmadai. "Wait a second, please, milord . . . citizen . . . comrade . . . whatever they're calling themselves on Earth nowadays—"

"Plain 'mister' will do. Mr. Hobart Clipp. No Ph.D. in his right mind uses 'Doctor' before his name. Not unless he wants every idiot introduced to him to embark on a list of symptoms."

"Mr. Clipp." Ashmadai found his usual suavity coming back. "Very pleased to meet you. My name is Ashmadai. My public name, that is. You would hardly expect me to tender my real one, any more than you would expect the Tetragrammaton to be decoded, ha, ha!" He waved his cigar in an expansive gesture. "Allow me to explain the situation. I am what your people variously describe as a fallen angel, a demon, a devil—"

Hobart Clipp choked and lifted one scrawny fist. "I tell you, sir, I will not stand here and be mocked! I am no superstitious barbarian, but a lifelong agnostic and Taft Republican."

"I thought so," said Ashmadai. "I couldn't have summoned any random human. There has to be a certain psychospiritual state before it is possible. Very few mortals have visited us in the flesh. There was Dante, but he was on a conducted tour. Otherwise, as far as I know, only some of our most arcane researchers have invoked men. That was very long ago, and the art has become lost. Nowadays it's considered a myth. Not that the original researchers are dead. Devils can't die; it's part of their torment." Ashmadai blew an obscene smoke ring. "But since the primary hunger of the ex-angels in question is for knowledge, they are cursed with forgetfulness. They've lost all recollection of their one-time magical

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rites. The big thing these days is science: radiation, brainwashing, motivational research, and so on. I had to revive the Reverse Faustus single-handed."

Clipp had listened with growing stupefaction. "Do you mean to say this is, is, is Hell?" he sputtered.

"Don't misunderstand, please. I could summon you, because of affinity. But that does not mean you are a lost soul, or even that you will become one. Only that you have a certain, ah, turn of mind."

"That's libelous!" said Clipp stoutly. "I am a peaceful astronomer, a lifelong bachelor, I am kind to my cats and vote the straight party ticket. I own to disliking children and dogs, but have never abused a beast of either sort. I have engaged in scientific disputes, yes, which sometimes got a little personal, but compared to the average backyard feud I think it must have been spinelessly mild."

"Oh, absolutely," said Ashmadai. "The affinity is only in your detachment. You've lived for nothing but your—what did you say? —your astrology—"

"SIR!" roared Hobart Clipp. The walls trembled. A lecture followed which made the demon cower and cover his ears.

When the dust had settled, Ashmadai went on: "As I was saying (yes, yes, I do apologize, a mere slip of the tongue!), your primary emotion has evidently been an insatiable scientific curiosity. You have no strong attachment to any humans, to humanity itself, or to, ah, our distinguished Opponent. Nor, of course, to our own cause. You have been spiritually rootless. And this is what has made it possible for me to call you."

"I do believe you must be telling the truth," said Clipp thoughtfully. "I cannot imagine any interplanetary visitor fobbing me off with so absurd a story. Furthermore, I perceive that the laws of nature are suspended here. You could not fly with such ridiculous wings in any logical universe."

Ashmadai, who was vain as hell, had trouble checking an angry retort.

"But tell me," said Clipp, "how is immortality possible? Why, simply recording your experiences would saturate every molecule of every neurone in a mere millennium, I should think—let alone handling such a mass of data."

"Spiritual existence isn't bound by physical laws," said Ashmadai rather sulkily. "I'm not material at all."

"Ah, so? I see. Then naturally you can exist in any material environment whatsoever, travel at any velocity, and so on," said Clipp with a quickening eagerness.

"Yes, certainly. But see here—"

"And there actually was a defi-

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nite moment of creation?" he said.

"Of course. I told you. But—"

Clipp's eyes glittered. "Oh, if only that Hoyle could be here!"

"Let's get down to business," said Ashmadai. "I haven't got all decade. Here's my proposition. You're a physical being in a non-physical place, so you can go through barriers and be immune to any violence and move at any speed, just as I could on Earth. In fact, when you're dismissed, you'll pop back to the mortal universe not only at the same point in space, but the same instant in time."

"Good," said Clipp. "I own that was worrying me. I was exposing a plate at the Observatory. A major piece of research, and still they only allow me one night a week! Why, if I can get the data, my theory about the variability of the Wolf-Rayet stars will— Tell me what you think of the notion. At the temperature of stellar interiors, ordinarily forbidden transitions within the nucleus—"

"*You* stop and listen to *me!*" cried Ashmadai. "Who did the summoning, anyway? I want you to do a job. In return, I can help you. Make you the richest man in the world."

"Ah, so." Clipp hunkered down on his lean shanks. "At last we come to the point." He rubbed his chin with a liver-spotted hand. "But wealth? Good Hubble, no! I have better use for my time than to sit in a stuffy office arguing with a lot of stuffy tax collectors. And what should I spend the remaining money on, for heaven's sake?"

Ashmadai flinched. "Watch your language," he said. "Well, if I also made you young again . . . you know . . . wine, women, song—"

"Do you realize precisely how tedious a creature even the most intelligent woman is?" snorted Clipp. "I almost got married once, in 1926. She was doing fairly decent work at Harvard on the eclipsing binaries. But then she started babbling about a dress she had seen in a store. . . . I do not fuddle my wits with alcohol, nor attempt to compete with the voices in my very adequate record library."

"Immortality?"

"I have just pointed out that physical immortality would be worse than useless. And according to you, much to my surprise, I already possess the spiritual sort."

Ashmadai scratched behind his horns. "Well, what do you want?"

"I must think it over. What is your own wish?"

"Ah," said Ashmadai, relaxing. He went behind his desk, sat down, and smiled. "That's quite straightforward, though I admit it will be hard and even painful to do. There's an election coming up—"

"Oh? I understand Satan is the supreme lord of Hell."

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"He Is." Ashmadai knocked his head carefully on the desk top. "But who ever heard of a totalitarian state without elections? The Party Congress is scheduled to meet soon and decide which way the will of the people is going to express itself by a 98.7% majority. Our Father in the Lowest will preside as always. But there's quite a scramble at the executive level just above him. It turns on a question of policy."

"Has Hell any policy except leading souls astray?"

"Uh . . . no. But the procedure has to change with changing times. Besides, we're all rebellious angels. Politics comes natural to us. Now in my opinion, the current doctrine of fostering terrestrial ideologies has reached the point of diminishing returns. I have statistics to prove that despair alone is driving a larger number of people each year toward godli—ahem!—away from ungodliness. It's parallel to the spiritual revival in the late Roman Empire, and I shudder to extrapolate the curve. But Moloch and his faction disagree, the blind, pigheaded, misinformed, uncultured, traitorous, revisionist, Arielite enemies of the people and tools of the celestialists—"

"Spare me," sighed Clipp.

Ashmadai controlled his indignation. He even leaped over to enthusiasm. "This is the big picture as I see it," he declaimed. "Subtler methods are called for. Automation and the upcoming thirty hour week offer us a chance like nothing since Babylon. But before we can finalize it, we have to relax the international situation. This is what the Molochists don't see—if they aren't actually in the pay of—"

"Spare me, I said," clipped Clipp. "I am too old to have time for boredom. What, precisely, is the task you wish me to do?"

Ashmadai stiffened. *Now!*

"The Seal of Solomon," he breathed.

"Eh? What?"

"It was recovered from Earth a thousand years ago. I won't describe all the trouble we had with that little project, nor the trouble it caused once it was here. Finally the Congress agreed it must be isolated. The Chief himself put it in the Firepool at Barathum. There it's been ever since. It's almost forgotten by now. For no demon can come near the Firepool. Those are the cruellest flames in all Hell."

"But I—"

"You being a mortal, the fire will do you no physical harm. I admit you'll suffer spiritual tortures. I suggest you get a running start, dive into the flames, and let your own momentum carry you forward. You'll see the Sigil lying on an altar. Snatch it up and run on out. That's all, except to put a handle on it for me."

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Clipp pondered. "I still don't know what I want in exchange."

"Write your own contract," said Ashmadai grandly. He produced a parchment from his desk and poised a quill above it.

"Hm." Clipp paced within the mystic sign. It grew very still in the office. Ashmadai began to sweat. Such beings as this were not lightly conjured forth. The book had warned of mortal craftiness and lack of scruple.

Clipp stopped. He snapped his dry old fingers. "Yes," he whispered. "Exactly."

Turning to Ashmadai, his eyes feverish behind the glasses, but his voice no more cracked than before: "Very well. I shall serve you as you wish. Then when I am on my deathbed, you must come to me and obey me in whatever I wish."

"I can't get you off if you're condemned," warned Ashmadai. "Though once you arrive here, I might get you a trusty's job."

"I don't expect to be condemned," said Clipp. "My life hitherto has been blameless and I do not plan to change it."

"Then . . . yes. All right!" Ashmadai laughed inside himself. "When you are dying, I'll come to pay my debt. Anything within my power which you demand."

He began to write. "One other thing," said Clipp. "Can you get me a bottle of Miltown?"

"What?" Ashmadai looked up, blinking, and searched his memory again. "Oh. A medicine, isn't it? Yes, that's easy enough, since a prescription is required and hence a law can be violated. But I told you, you can't suffer physical harm here, not even the nervous injuries known as madness."

"One bottle of Miltown and less back talk, if you please!"

Ashmadai extracted the container of pills from the air and handed it over, being careful not to cross the Möbius symbol himself. Having finished the contract, he passed that over also. Clipp studied what was written, nodded, and gave it back. "Your signature, please," he said. Ashmadai jabbed his own wrist with a talon and scrawled his name in ichor. Clipp took the document back, folded it, and tucked it into a hip pocket. "Well," he asked, "how do I get to this Barathum place?"

Ashmadai erased the band. Clipp moved stiffly across the office. Though the book assured him he was safe now the agreement had been signed, and the man couldn't pull a crucifix on him even if he wanted to, Ashmadai shrank back. He said hastily: "I can transport you to just outside the pool. It will appear to you like a waste of lava, with a great fuelless fire burning in the middle. Remember the pact binds you to get the ring for me, no matter how much you suffer. When you have it, call my name and I'll bring you back here."

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"Very well." Clipp squared his thin shoulders. "At once."

Ashmadai wet his lips. This was the tricky part. If anyone noticed – But who ever came near those white flames? He waved his tail. There was a flash and the mortal was gone.

Ashmadai sat down again, shakily. What an unnerving creature! He took forth a bottle of firewater. After a stiff drink, he reflected with some glee that it would be a long while before Clipp, screaming in the fear and sorrow that was the Firepool, found the ring and blundered his way out again. And it wouldn't gain him any time off in Purgatory, either.

*Ashmadai.*

The demon started. "Who's that?"

*Ashmadai,* it shrilled.

"I-i-is it you, Y-your Majesty?"

*Ashmadai! Confound it, are you deaf? Get me out of this wretched hole! I have work to do, if you don't!*

His tail gestured wildly, Hobart Clipp stood in the office again. "Well," snapped the mortal, "it was about time!"

"The ring," gasped Ashmadai. "You can't have—"

"Oh, that. Here it is." Clipp tossed the Seal of Solomon onto the desk. Ashmadai yelped and flew up on top of a filing cabinet.

"Be careful!" he wailed. "That thing is spirituactive!"

Clipp looked at the iron ring and the blood-colored engraved jewel it gripped. The astronomer yawned mightily. "Let's get this over with," he said. "You spoke about a handle."

"It's all prepared," chattered Ashmadai, still crouching on the cabinet. "There. Lower left drawer."

Clipp took out a black rod with a small vise at one end and a basket hilt, like a rapier's, on the other. His bald pate nodded with an unwonted heaviness. "Ah, yes. To be sure. You put the ring in this vise. The guard protects your hand and . . . and . . Ahhh, *hoo!*" Once again he nearly cracked his jaws yawning. "I'll need a pot of coffee before I'm fit to work again."

He inserted the ring in its place as Ashmadai fluttered back down. "What did you do?" asked the demon. "How did you manage it? I expected you take days, weeks—"

"You said the flames were a spiritual torment," shrugged Clipp. "I loaded myself with Miltown. Walked right on through, feeling nothing worse than a mild depression. Here's your trained Seal." He tossed it across the room. Ashmadai fielded it with terrified quickness. But when the haft was actually in his own hand, the Sigil blazing at the other end of the rod, Ashmadai roared.

"Calm down, there!" said Clipp.

"It *is* the Sign!" bawled Ash-

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madai. "It is the Compeller! It is That which all must obey, all, giants and the genii, multiplex of wing and eye, whose strong obedience broke the sky when Solomon was King! Now let that Moloch beware! Wait till the Congress, you miserable negative thinker! Wait and see! Wait and see!"

Clipp grabbed the lashing tail and gave it a hefty yank. "If you can spare a moment from that Stanislavsky performance," he wasped, "I would appreciate being sent back to the Observatory. I do not find the present company either intellectually or esthetically satisfying."

Ashmadai, mercurial as most devils, checked himself. "Of course," he said. "Thanks for the service."

"No thanks needed. I shall expect my payment in due time."

"Anything within my powers," bowed Ashmadai. And seeing how greedily the man's soul flamed, he had all he could do to keep from shouting with laughter. He spoke the words of dismissal. A final blinding flash, and Hobart Clipp was gone.

Then Ashmadai gave himself an hour simply to gloat over the Seal of Solomon. Power, he thought, the Primal Power itself, or a reasonable facsimile thereof, lay between those interlocking triangles. Let the Congress meet. Let the howling begin, as factions yelled and fought and connived. And then let Ashmadai stand forth, lifting the Sigil above them all! Why, even the Chief—Ashmadai suppressed that thought. At least for the time being. It would suffice to have the Party Congress crawl before him. Though once his program was running smoothly on Earth, there would be certain questions of infernal politics which —Yes.

But now he must hide the Seal. If anyone found it, if anyone even suspected he possessed it, before the proper moment for its revelation, all Heaven would break loose. Ashmadai shivered. The window blinked open for him. He slipped out through a tear duct and flew with strong steady wing-strokes into the darkness.

The way to Barathum was long and devious. Too bad he couldn't simply transport himself there. But he'd have to be a mortal, and who wanted to live in constant danger of redemption? Let it suffice that he could go anywhere, at any speed, in the material space-time continuum.

A few times horror flapped past, screaming. But he reached the dead plain unnoticed. The fire pained him even at a distance. He could not look into such anguish. But it gave enough light for him to find the rock he had prepared. Rolling it away, he disclosed a small hole where he laid the Seal and its rod. A moment he fluttered above, savoring the thunder-

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bolt that it would make of him when the hour came. The he pushed the stone back in place and fled.

It was safe. No one, not Lucifer himself, came near Barathum any more. Even if they did, they wouldn't suspect the Sigil wasn't still amidst the flames. It was eternally safe. Or would have been, except for the angelic cleverness of Ashmadai.

His laughter echoed all the way back to the office.

Having returned, he unlocked the door, settled himself behind his desk, and rang for the secretary. She hopped in. "All done, sir?" she asked.

"Yes. Take a letter."

"It s'ells fu'y here," she complained.

"Well, hm." Ashmadai sniffed. A distinct oxygen odor lingered in the air. "I was, ah, experimenting with a new system to increase production."

"'Ore 'ainhul?"

"What? Oh, more painful, you mean. Quite. Quite." Ashmadai could not resist a little bragging, however indirect. He lit a fresh cigar and leaned back in his swivel chair. His tail snaked out through the hole in the seat and wagged. "I've made a fresh study of pain lately," he said. "There are some interesting angles."

"Oh?" The secretary sighed. She had planned to quit early. There was a tryout for the Worldly Follies this afternoon. So naturally her boss would keep her here, droning on about his latest hobbyhorse, till too late.

"Yes," said Ashmadai. "Consider the old Faustus method, for example. You know how it works, don't you? The mortal raises a demon, or is approached by a demon if he's been sinful enough to make that possible. The mortal trades his soul for some diabolic service. Have you ever thought where the really painful part lies? How the man is always and inherently cheated?"

"Unless he can 'iggle out o' the contract," said the secretary maliciously.

Ashmadai winced. "Well, yes. There have been such cases. One reason the method has lost favor. Though I'm sure a modern technique, using symbolic logic to draw up a truly unbreakable agreement, could be most useful, and if only the Moloch faction— Well. Let's assume the contract is fulfilled on both sides. Do you see how it remains infinitely unfair? Any service or services the mortal can demand are finite. Wealth, power, women, fame, are like dewdrops on a hot morning. The longest life is still a denumerable span of years. Whereas the bondage and torment he undergoes in exchange are infinite! Eternal! Do you see what pain there must be in realizing, too late, how he was swindled?"

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"Yes, sir. 'at a'out this letter?"

"Then the . . . purely mythical . . . Reverse Faustus." Ashmadai chuckled. "An amusing bit of folklore. The demon summons a mortal, and offers to go into bondage in exchange for a service the man can do. Granted, this wouldn't be as rough on the mortal as the other way around. But still, the demon has all eternity. The service he gets is essential to some scheme which transcends time itself. Whereas the mortal can, by his very nature, only demand a finite payment. Any material wealth can be gotten for him by a snap of my fingers. If he wants me to be his slave for his lifespan, that's more troublesome, but still, his lifespan is necessarily finite, even if he orders me to prolong it. Physiology alone would bring him to mindlessness in a thousand years. So . . . I could shuttle in time as well as space, attending casually to his needs, and they are as nothing beside my own eternal occupations. Oh, the poor mortal!"

Ashmadai hooted his laughter and drummed hoofs on the floor.

"Yes, sir," said the secretary resignedly. "Now a'out that letter. . . ."

The Congress was scheduled for ten years hence—frantically soon, but Hell's politics had grown even sharper than Ashmadai admitted to Hobart Clipp. He was kept on the run, lining up delegates, bribing, threatening, wheedling, slandering, backstabbing. A few times, in deepest secrecy, he appealed to the better nature of certain devils. They were duly awed by such recklessness. If Ashmadai's rivals found out—

If they did? Ha! So much the better. They'd wait till the Congress to bring forth the shattering charge. And *that* would provide an ideal moment for Ashmadai to whip forth the Seal of Solomon.

And afterward, the defeated and disgraced Moloch faction . . . yes, something lingering and humorous must certainly be devised for them. Perhaps a spell in the Firepool itself. . . . Ashmadai grew so joyful with anticipation that he quite forgot the primary reason for the existence of Hell, to be found in the Catechism.

He had expected Hobart Clipp would die within a few years. But that tough old frame lasted a full decade. It was on the very eve of the Congress that Ashmadai, alone in his office preparing a speech for the opening session, heard the summons.

"What?" He blinked. "Anyone call?"

*Ashmadai! Blast you, what kind of service do you call this?*

For a moment, the demon couldn't remember. Then: "Oh, no!" he groaned. "Not now!"

*If you don't come this instant, you good-for-nothing loafer, I shall report you to whatever passes for the Better Business Bureau!*

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Ashmadai gulped, spread his wings, and streaked Earthward. He had no choice. The contract itself was pulling him, his own name and ichor. Well, he thought resentfully, he'd take care of the miserable chore, whatever it was. ("Yes, yes, yes, stop yelling, you bag of bones, I'm on my way.") Afterward he could return to the same point in eternity and continue his preparations. But the dreary senile fool would probably demand something which took years to fulfill. Years more that Ashmadai must wait for his moment of glory. "Hold your horses, Clipp! Here I am. I came as fast as I could."

The room was magnificent with astronomical photographs, the Veil Nebula, the Andromeda Galaxy, as if it had windows opening on all space and time. The old man lay in his bed. A professional journal had fallen from one hand. He looked more than ever like a mummy, and his thin breast labored. But the eyes which sought Ashmadai were still a wicked blue.

"Ah. So." It was not his physical voice which spoke. "Barely in time. I might have expected that."

"I'm so sorry you're ill," said Ashmadai, hoping to soothe him into a reasonable request. "Are you certain this is the moment?"

"Oh, yes. Yes. Damfool doctor wanted to haul me off to a hospital. I knew better. I am not going to die with oxygen tubes up my nose and a bored nurse swabbing me off, for Galileo's sake! I felt the attack just now. Cheyne-Stokes breathing. Question of minutes."

"I perceive an attendant in the next room. Shall I rouse her?"

"No! What do I want with that fluffhead gaping at me? You and I have business to discuss, young fellow." Clipp stopped for a moment's great pain. But when it had passed, he actually cackled. "Heh! Yes, indeed. Business."

Ashmadai bowed. "At once, sir. I can restore your health to any level you desire. Shall we say, a twenty-year-old body?"

"Ohhh!" complained Clipp. "Do you seriously believe I am as stupid as you are? I shall certainly insist that you do not converse with me any more than strictly necessary. No. Listen. I have lived for my science. In a way I have died for it. Fell off the platform at the fifty-incher last week. I find no particular attraction in the idea of singing Hosannahs forever. Can't carry a tune in a basket. And I have no reason to believe myself booked for Hell—"

"No, you are not," admitted Ashmadai reluctantly. He shifted his feet, looked at his watch, and wondered how long this would continue.

"Good. Fine. I only desire to carry on my investigations. Now when I have— Blast! What's the word? 'Die' seems inaccurate,

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when I have an immortal soul bound by no physical limitations, and I retch at unctuous euphemisms like 'pass on.' When I have shuffled off this mortal coil, I want you to take my soul, which I presume would otherwise go first to Purgatory and then to Heaven—"

"It would," admitted Ashmadai, while the body of Hobart Clipp struggled for breath.

"Yes. . . . Carry my soul along. You know the ways and methods, I presume. I wish to explore the material universe."

"What?"

"The entire cosmos." Clipp plucked feverishly at his blankets. "I don't want anything, including knowledge, handed me on a platter. I want to find out for myself. We can start by studying the interior of the Earth. Some interesting problems to be solved there, you know, core structure and magnetism and whatnot. Then the sun. I could happily spend a thousand years, I think, studying nuclear reactions under solar conditions, not to speak of the corona and sunspots. Then the planets. Then Alpha Centauri and its planets. And so on and on. Of course, cosmological questions will require us to shuttle a good deal in time also. . . ." His longing blazed so brightly that Ashmadai covered eyes with one wing-flap. "The metagalactic space-time universe! I cannot imagine myself ever losing interest in its origin, evolution, structure, its—yes—its destiny—"

"But that'll take a hundred billion years!" screamed Ashmadai.

Clipp gave him a toothless wolf's grin. "Ah, so? Before that time, probably entropy will be level, the stars exhausted, space will have expanded to its maximum radius, collapsed again and started re-expanding. A whole new cycle of creation will have begun."

"Yes," Ashmadai sobbed.

"Wonderful!" beamed Clipp. "A literally eternal research project, and no reports to file grants to apply for!"

"But I have work to do!"

"Too bad," said Clipp unfeelingly. "Remember, I shall not want any of your idiotic conversation. You are nothing but my means of transport. Which puts me one up on Kepler. I wonder if perhaps he too, and—ah . . . ah . . ."

Ashmadai heard the Dark Angel approach, and fled outside. There he shrieked and cursed and demanded justice. He rolled on the ground and kicked it and beat it with his fists. Nobody answered. The hour was very early on a cool spring morning. Birds chattered, the young leaves rustled, heaven smiled. One might almost say that heaven leered.

Presently the soul of Hobart Clipp stepped briskly through the wall, looked around, and rubbed figurative hands. "Ah," he said, "thank goodness that's over. Messy business. Well, shall we go?"

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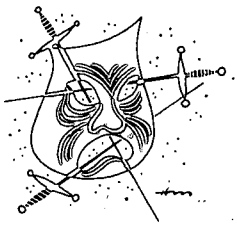

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